



Transcript

Episode 6.15

Book 6, Chapter 15: The Unbreakable Vow

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 Fifteen: The Unbreakable Vow.

Lorrie: The Unbreakable Vow. Slughorn's Christmas party is the event of the season, but not everyone gets an invite, including Draco, who is trying to crash or so he claims when Filch catches him. Snape takes Draco aside for a private word and Harry overhears their whole argument. Ah... That's the plot synopsis, but boy, this chapter feels different from that, right?

JC: Yeah. It feels like Teen Drama: Part Two. It's the next episode of the previous teen drama.

Lorrie: There is the risk of danger lurking everywhere in this chapter in a teen drama way. It brought me right back to high school. It was always the girls plotting to ask the boys out to dances; it was supposed to be the boys asking the girls, but the girls were the ones who were really interested. Harry has to avoid the mistletoe hangings because everywhere he goes, when there's mistletoe, the girls are bunching around it and causing traffic jams in the hallways, trying to get him to date them. Oh, my goodness... What a life.

JC: Are they really interested in Harry, or is it that they want to go to Slughorn's party, because that's how I was reading it: that all these girls are angling for an invite to the party.

Lorrie: That, too.

JC: More than they actually are interested in Harry.

Lorrie: But they are specifically crushing out on Harry because, as we find out part way through the chapter, Hermione has to warn him. "Oh, there's a whole conspiracy to drug you with love potions, and it's not only one girl." Harry is the crush of the moment, in addition to them wanting the party.

JC: So maybe it's that what I'm picking up on is Harry's read is that. Harry doesn't seem to take any of their affections seriously. He's not interested, which I had -- Wow, I identify with this. I was not necessarily a kid who was conscious of all that stuff happening at school; it just was not really on my radar, so I'm with Harry here.

Lorrie: Yeah, and his whole thing is he has bigger worries.

JC: Yeah, and already has an unattainable crush, too, by the way.

Lorrie: Oh, my goodness, yes.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: All he wants to do is avoid this because he has something much more important on his mind, which we find out is the same for Draco. Draco doesn't have time to worry about small things like Quidditch anymore -- things that used to be his whole life -- and Slughorn's whole party is the same for Harry. Slughorn is planning this party around Harry, and Harry's just thinking, 'I guess I can't avoid this one.'

JC: Yeah. Harry's always had radar for when people want to use him for their own gain. This is a thing that he's been very aware of, which you would as a celebrity.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: And the radar for that just goes off constantly around Slughorn, so he knows what this party is going to be like, yeah.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Even though Dumbledore had told him earlier on that "Slughorn is going to try to collect you, and you should consider letting him because there's some benefit in it for you," but oh, Harry hates that. He seems like he really appreciates sincerity in other people, and any kind of artifice just... Ugh.

Lorrie: He just knows, yeah. Meanwhile, the teenagers are all negotiating the extreme awkwardness that is necessary when you make the move into being young adults like this. There's no way around it; you have to adjust. You have to change and adjust, but it's so awkward the whole time. This sentence really brought me back: "Lavender seemed to regard any moment that she was not kissing Ron as a moment wasted." Oh, the awkwardness and the accuracy.

JC: Oh, my gosh, yeah.

Lorrie: And Ginny was, of course, completely correct: Ron's whole attitude problem beforehand was that he wasn't getting any.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Now that he has evidence that somebody finds him desirable, that's what he needed and there's no getting around that if that's what's at the core of your misery. You can't deny it, you can't suppress it, you can't be polite about it; it's going to be there.

JC: But for someone who has a girlfriend, he sure spends an awful lot of his time talking about Hermione.

Lorrie: Well, desirability is different from actually wanting someone, especially in the context of what we know about Merope Gaunt and how she got a husband. That's one of those miserable truths about romance that you have to deal with: you cannot force reciprocal affection. You can't; it's just not going to work, and it's so miserable. Ron is just plain defensive because how he feels is how he feels, and what are you going to do about it? He's just mumbling, "Well, someone wants to snog me, too," and acknowledging in a mumbly way, "Yeah, I said I was going to go to Slughorn's party with her, but she didn't say. She said 'just as friends'. I'm a free agent." There's no rationalizing any of it; he just has to be defensive. Awkward... Meanwhile, poor Hermione's like, "I don't care who Ron kisses."

Ouch. AND she's still giving nasty looks to the Half-Blood Prince's book because he doesn't want her in any way either. She's having the worst time here.

JC: All of this is so interesting because I guess they're sixteen, right in the middle of a time when most people really do get into dating people and all the drama of that. It's kind of horrifying on one level, because we all remember there being a time when this thing was happening in our lives, but also charming because it feels like such a rite of passage, when you're just exploring these kinds of relationships and figuring out what might happen and feeling jealous. Then, as we said before, Harry's got other things on his mind, and now he's stuck in the middle of Ron and Hermione...

Lorrie: Oh, my goodness, yes. Again.

JC: Which has also happened before, right? Actually, each of them has had a turn, I think at this point, being the one in the middle, but the way that Harry deals with it just by keeping his mouth shut and just going, 'Mm-hmm,' and not responding to either of them is kind of funny, because that feels like a very Harry way of dealing with it. Ron would totally side with whoever is complaining; Hermione would give suggestions for doing it better or fixing it; Harry just keeps his mouth shut.

Lorrie: Yeah, and he's making decisions, too, about not talking about how he feels about Ginny. They all are; even Ron and Hermione are making decisions about what they keep to themselves. It's not easy because their emotions are all so sore, but you see them making the transition and you see development in this chapter and people realizing, 'Oh, I have to step up, I have to do that.' This is so contrasted with how Voldemort became Voldemort, because none of this extremely advanced, sophisticated, emotional juggling and maturing is possible without a really secure foundation. Ron may have been upset that he wasn't sure anyone desired him, but he was never afraid about people loving him. He always knew he had a family and friends and they absolutely cared about him; it was just, 'Would he be left alone? Would he be left behind when it comes to desirability?' But he's got a really strong foundation. Harry and Hermione, as Ginny pointed out, already know that somebody has found them desirable. These are all really, really advanced things compared to Tom Riddle having zero foundation for any companionship, love, anybody appreciating that he exists in the world; we have also Snape -- as the example of somebody who came from a family which was good and bad -- was not

found desirable. Whatever misery and jealousy Ron was suffering from in the previous couple chapters, Snape... It's too late for him now. He's gone through to full adulthood and almost middle age with that bitter jealousy cemented in him; it's immature, it's mortifying. The fact that these kids are struggling through all of this renegotiation of how to behave and how to feel and what to do with their sore feelings is a real privilege. Draco does have the foundation where he knows he was found desirable by somebody, but he doesn't have the time or attention to be developing as a young adult in this arena; he's got bigger concerns also.

JC: Right, and considering what we hear in the conversation with him and Snape at the end of the book, he's already moved on. In his mind, at least, he's already an adult; he's already doing adult things, and that's something else that you see at this age with teenagers a lot.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: And some kids at this age absolutely, one hundred percent, have adult responsibilities, like Draco has been thrust into here.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: They're taking care of younger siblings, they're making money to help pay the rent where they live, they're on their own.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: There's lots of kids who are like that, and then there are kids who, on the complete other side of it, just get to play and have fun, so we're seeing the spread of that here as well, which is interesting.

Lorrie: Yeah, and if you can just imagine Tom Riddle by this point, he would have totally been one of those teenagers in our world who was a manager at McDonald's.

JC: Oh, my God, that would be a hilarious fanfic!

Lorrie: Oh, my God, yeah!

JC: The most evil manager of a fast food restaurant.

Lorrie: Yeah. He wouldn't even be helping out his family with rent; it would be him on his own.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And absolutely no room to be silly and blow off steam as a teenager with shenanigans. That is such a luxury. This is really a contrast to see; what they're going through is all so awkward, but it is a privilege. We see Hermione, even in the depths of her misery where the Half-Blood Prince is ignoring her and beating her in all her classes. Ron is the disgrace of their year, making out on every available surface, but even under those circumstances, Hermione has to say, "Harry, by the way, there's this conspiracy. They're trying to poison you, and I have a solution for you. If you find a date, then they're going to stop thinking they can angle for you to ask them out, so that can protect you. This is a strategy I highly recommend," which is a brilliant strategy and totally makes sense. Then we see Harry taking care of himself by lying: "Um, there's nobody I want to ask." Okay, Harry... being a grown-up, too.

JC: Though I think even Hermione knows that's not true...

Lorrie: Yep!

JC: But they both know that the person he wants to ask is not available, and I love the implication there that he's been having some sexy dreams about Ginny that he's not going to tell anybody about.

Lorrie: Right, and the author is not writing this for the reader to get off on it either.

JC: Yeah, for sure.

Lorrie: It's happening, it's real, it's his business.

JC: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Before we get into the next part, we were talking about privilege, and one thing that's interesting to me about this round of asking people out is that two years ago we had the Yule Ball, which was open to everybody above a certain age, kind of like a prom, right?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: This one is different because it's exclusive.

Lorrie: It's so awful.

JC: Yeah, it's really awful. It's the party of the year, and it's not like being a freshman and thinking, 'Oh, I hope a senior will ask me out.' Not everybody gets to go, and it's a completely different dynamic than we saw two years ago. It's a dynamic that should not be in a school.

Lorrie: So awful.

JC: But actually, it mirrors what's happening in our world right now and what's happening in their world, too. "We're stratifying things and we're restricting access to certain things for only certain people, and we're openly oppressing other people or denying them access to things, and what are you going to do about it?"

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It feels like it's a symptom of what's happening in the larger world.

Lorrie: And it's generating enjoyment out of the distress that this causes people when you introduce this dynamic. All of this kind of suffering is completely unnecessary, but humans are wired that way. If you choose not to activate that and if you actively choose kindness and inclusiveness, that works, but if you choose to activate all of human competitiveness and insecurity and the pleasure of excluding others and being petty, we don't have a whole lot of defenses against that once that starts. You can defend against it, but the majority are going to find themselves, even against their own will, feeling it. Slughorn... there are these clubs I've heard of where it's multi-story, and if you queue up outside, the bouncers look at you and if you're attractive enough, they let you in; then if you're attractive enough on the first floor, they let you into the second floor, and out of those people, if you're attractive enough, you get up to the third floor. People subject themselves to this?

JC: I'm like, 'Who else is on the top floor? Not anyone I would probably want to be around. My darkest idea is that Jeffrey Epstein is on the top floor, right? That's kind of where my brain goes with that, but oh, my god.

Lorrie: Yeah, because if you're going to do that, then who are you making feel bad along the way and in what ways, and how are you farming superiority by putting others down? Yeah. Here's Slughorn creating this caste system of coolness, and Harry, like you, has severe ideas about how little he wants anything to do with that,

but the only way he can defend against it is to just check off the boxes and attend, and then that will fill his duty. Yuck! Oh, I love also how Harry and Hermione totally have material on each other; they keep each other in check about being hypocrites, because one of them has Confunded someone at tryouts and the other one has pretended to put potions in other people's drinks.

When Hermione brings that up, Harry just says, "Moving on..." Nobody is pure here.

JC: It's also interesting to me here that neither of them ever seems to think, 'Maybe we should just go together.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That seems like that would have been an easy solution to all this, but maybe not. Maybe it would've just made things worse.

Lorrie: Yeah. Well, they have this discussion where Harry is super interested in how girls are sneaking love potions in not because he cares about love potions, but because this might help with the mystery about Draco! Hermione says "love potions aren't Dark or dangerous," and Harry says, quite rightly, "Easy for you to say."

JC: Yeah. This whole little mini-plot (which then becomes a bigger thing later) of girls sneaking in love potions and planning to dose boys with them, and that they're being enabled to do this because the love potions are being packaged in a way that makes them look innocuous... It's really dark.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: It's incredibly dark, and the fact that it's played for a laugh is disturbing to me. It's more disturbing to me now than I think it was on a first read, partly because I'm older and partly because we've dealt with a lot of things that have to do with women, in particular, being harassed and treated really badly by men in power, but this reads so much darker to me this time.

Lorrie: I think it always read dark to me because we know that Merope did it to a Muggle, and that was part of what makes Tom Riddle's life so cursed before he's even born. If you're going to dehumanize somebody and exert your willpower over

them in this way, then you're creating a life where human dignity is not even acknowledged. Yuck!

JC: I think another reason that it stood out to me so much more this time is because I've only read this book once; in a couple of chapters or so, we see what it looks like to be under the influence of one of these, and it's pretty horrifying.

Lorrie: It's scary.

JC: It's kind of being played for laughs here, but when you see the reality, it's like, 'Shit, that's not okay,' and I think that's probably also where my brain was on a first read.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Also as a writer for young adults, the author is incorporating into her series the reality that this is the age when people want to go out and get drunk and party and do things that will enable them to interact with people without their inhibitions getting in the way. It takes a lot of maturity to go after what you want socially while being sober and taking responsibility for it.

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: Humans want some assistance in letting go of the inhibitions, so this is going to be a reality whether that's okay or not. We see here Harry's drinking... People are offering him alcohol, there's alcohol at Slughorn's party, these underage people are drinking... This is happening whether you write about it or not, and the aura around it is definitely naughty and fun and transgressive. Basically, sex isn't safe; it's something that humans deal with or don't, but it's an element of human life that has to be included and acknowledged and it's not a safe thing by nature. If you try to make it safe, oh, good luck; that's not how it works. It's not up to us to declare that it can be a safe thing to package neatly and regulate. Part of being human is knowing it's one of those things that's so powerful that you are humbled; you have to deal with it. You can't say how you're going to deal with it. You have to deal with it and it does feel naughty, and libido is naughty and rule-breaking. Even perfectly legit marriages... Even the Weasleys were doing something super naughty as students that caused Arthur Weasley to get physically punished so hard

(even though they're the least sexy, most respectable couple), but no, it started out really naughty. That's, yeah, an inescapable fact that they all have to deal with whether they want to or not. Oh, we get a Harpy.

JC: Yeah. That was a little surprise to me there. I was like, 'What?'

Lorrie: Yeah. That's weird, right? Madame Pince suddenly turning into a Harpy, and all she cares about is being the guardian -- the vengeful, screechy guardian of books -- and she's suddenly characterized as having "a long hooked nose" and claws. This was a red herring; fandom really ran with it (and I can totally see why, even though it didn't pan out) where they thought that this was the author telling us that Madame Pince is the Half-Blood Prince's mother.

JC: Oh...

Lorrie: Because her name is Irma, so they thought, 'Is Irma Pince supposed to be an anagram that says, "I'm a Prince"?' Which is silly, but that's what Tom Riddle did to get Voldemort...

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: Which is an argument against. 'Well, you don't use the same trick twice,' but she's so described as the long hooked nose and the unpleasant, older, dried-out, scary aspect of her, and the reaction she's having is to things having been written in the Half-Blood Prince's textbook, which we later find out was Eileen Prince's textbook. You can totally see why fandom went in that direction, but no, actually, she's just a Harpy.

JC: I kind of remember that now (that people had thought that about Madame Pince), and I had totally forgotten it until you brought it up, but I'm also thinking about... My first reaction to this was, 'Is this the author making her opinion known that it's okay to write in books?' The fact that Madame Pince was going after them ("It's been befouled!")... Is this the author just making fun of people who feel like books are pure and sacred that you should never write in them? It felt so pointed somehow.

Lorrie: Well, yeah. I was reading it as this is just another human urge. There are guardians of purity everywhere, and if that's one of your character traits, people are just going to have to deal with it. Harry and Hermione talk about, "Oh, maybe

there's something between her and Argus Filch because he has the same attitude: 'Befouling the castle!'" Filch, the castle is here for students to live in. "No, it's not!" I very much uncomfortably recognized the way Harry and Hermione are making really mean, gross-out jokes about, "Oh, maybe Pince and Filch have something going on. Eww, ha, ha, ha, ha," because that was a strain of immaturity I definitely remember from being even this old in high school and being grossed out at the thought of older adults in school being sexual or having lurid romances. We were very unkind and immature about it, which feels really developmentally...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: That was just mean, because we find out later that actually there is something between them. What are you going to do if this is your job day in and day out and you're surrounded by these... Every year, different students, same maturity level, over and over again; you see all these hundreds of people every day, and so few of them are people that you can relate to. That was a super accurate glimpse at this precise stage of development. You'd think Hermione would be above it; no. That's teen insensitivity for you. Then they go to Transfiguration class.

JC: Yeah. Before that, they go back to the common room and Romilda Vane is immediately trying to give Harry a love potion. She offers him a drink as soon as he walks in the door, which is like --

Lorrie: "Gillywater?" Yeah.

JC: Okay, that's really dark.

Lorrie: So natural. Yeah.

JC: Oh, my gosh, yeah.

Lorrie: And Hermione doesn't even have to say "I told you so." Then she says, "You want these Chocolate Cauldrons?" Why is a grandmother sending fire whiskey to a child? No, they're totally... This is how they live.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: So yes, it's just one more challenge for Harry to have to avoid. In Transfiguration class, everything is so uncomfortable. Hermione, of course, laughs at Ron's disastrous work, and oh, I felt it when Ron mocked her. I felt that.

JC: Yeah. First of all, what they're working on is human transfiguration, which is like, 'Oh, my God,' right? What an on-the-nose kind of a thing at this age.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: 'If only I could change...' "Well, with MAGIC..."

Lorrie: 'If only I could have a mustache...' Oh, yeah, sure!

JC: 'If only I could change my nose or change my eyes or whatever...' Yeah. Oh, my God. 'Yeah, let's take all the physical body insecurity to the next level, and if you're just good enough at magic, you could fix all those things.' 'Wow, really?'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It was kind of wild to me that that is even a thing that exists in this universe.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Yeah. And then Ron just being cruel at this point, to the point where it's just like, 'Oh, God, Ron.' Ugh...

Lorrie: Yeah. Then they gang up on her because Lavender and Parvati laugh at Hermione with Ron, and Hermione cries. She runs away and cries. Ouch... And what they're mocking her for is this is who she is. She's overenthusiastic in class. What's she going to do, change? This is exactly what she was laughing at Ron about: well, she is good at school, not like Mr. Handlebar Mustache over here. Harry assesses the situation and goes to help Hermione. Oh, God...

JC: Yeah. When you've got that situation where there's two friends and one's being mean to the other, the perception of taking sides... He's tried so hard to look like he's taking sides, but also he knows when he needs to go and be support for one or the other. Yeah.

Lorrie: All right, and no one else is going to comfort Hermione (or so he thinks), but then he encounters Luna comforting Hermione a bit. Aaawww!

JC: And Luna saying, "Ron can be a bit unkind." Wow, in a very Luna way.

Lorrie: Yep, and so unsettling, and Harry just looking at her like, 'Um, okay. I'm going to have to learn how to deal with this. Huh...' So what did you think about the way he asked her out?

JC: I love that he just did it on impulse.

Lorrie: Yeah!

JC: Because he'd been thinking about how the time is running out and Hermione's like, "You've got to ask somebody." Girls are still following him around and trying to dose him with love potion, and it's just like, " You know what? This is a person that I know, that I've been through shit with," and then he almost immediately hopes that she'll say no.

Lorrie: Oh, my God... It was all so --

JC: And he's immediately like, "Just as friends!"

Lorrie: It was all so relatable...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And I think partly, it popped out of him like that because she put him so off balance by the way she is. While he was thinking about how unusual she is, it just came out and he's like, "Oh, shit, I didn't mean to say that. God, this whole thing makes me so, so, so happy, because earlier in the chapter, Ron is mumbling that he and Hermione had been going to the party together just as friends, so it's really putting down the whole "as friends" status. Luna is thrilled, and you realize she would have been less thrilled to be asked out romantically; it's having friends that she really, really wants. This is the kind of emotional support and development that Luna hasn't had but that she would crave. It comes before romance, just like Tom Riddle would have loved to have an adult caregiver give a crap that he existed; without that foundation, the other things are irrelevant. For Luna here, she wants a friend. That's so much more fundamental than this sixteen-year-old dating stage. The friendship has to come first; you have to know that people want you that way in their life. The thrilled way she says that "Nobody's ever asked me to a party before, as a friend..." Oh, my God, that's really special -- that really is -- and the thing that Luna has gotten from this is never again will she have to wonder if Harry thinks that she's his friend. She'll never have to think, 'Oh, do they just tolerate me?

Are they laughing at me behind my back?' No, it just came out of him. He must think that she must be okay by him. That's amazing, and it's not that he doesn't know she's weird and awkward.

JC: Yeah. I love that he immediately feels ambivalent about it, but it's also a relief because he's not interested in... Ron's like, "You could have asked *anybody* and you asked *her*?" and it's like, 'Yeah.' He asked a friend that he knew he could trust was not going to read anything into it that wasn't there, and he doesn't have to deal with that later because he's already got someone who's interested in that he can't have. He's not interested, and also his life is really complicated, so why would he introduce this other thing? Actually, it's so good, and even Ginny is like, "I'm really glad you asked her. She's really excited to be going."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: He even gets a little reward of Ginny being proud of him.

Lorrie: Despite him going, "Errr, you could have looked a little more jealous."

JC: Yeah. Yeah, that's true, too, but also Ron's reaction just shows where Ron's brain is right now.

Lorrie: Yeah. Yeah, no, this is one of my most loved plot points: wow, a solution to this that's only win-win-win.

JC: It is.

Lorrie: He gets to give Luna a fun evening out, and a million times better: he gets to enjoy what happens when Luna encounters this kind of stratification.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Imagine how boring the party would have been for him without that element, but no. She can confuse the heck out of everyone and she herself will be completely unbothered.

JC: Yeah. Oh, yeah, Luna at the party is really great.

Lorrie: Lovely, lovely.

JC: Oh, my gosh. It's also interesting that Peeves pops up at exactly the time you would not want him to...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But Harry doesn't seem to be too bothered about it, which is such a sign of maturity there. 'Okay, Peeves is going to go...' He's going, basically, 'Potter and Lovegood, sitting in a tree,' and Harry's going, 'Eh, all right, fine. At least the word will get around.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: 'Maybe the girls will stop bothering me.'

Lorrie: Yeah. 'We've gotten PR taken care of.' Then he's in the Great Hall talking to Parvati, and Lavender comes and she physically squeezes between Harry and Ron to start making out with Ron, which is so physically uncomfortable and icky to think that you're in skin-to-skin contact with a makeout session that's about to happen. You can just imagine how much Harry would have been shoving away from this, and I thought, 'Oh, that's a metaphor, right?' They all have to redefine their boundaries because this is happening. It's physical space that they have to renegotiate. Then he sees that Parvati is undergoing a parallel, identical readjustment in her own life where she looks faintly embarrassed and bored. Yes, Parvati too has assessed the situation; she's redefining her own boundaries.

JC: Right before they show up, Harry is trying to get Ron to apologize to Hermione.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's one little attempt to make some peace between them. "You could just apologize to her," and no, Ron's not going to do that.

Lorrie: No. All right.

JC: But Hermione very soon gets her revenge.

Lorrie: Sort of.

JC: Yeah. Well, it feels like revenge for about a minute.

Lorrie: Yeah. Well, she's trying something. She can't not do anything, and who knows... She's never done anything like this before. I love that moment where Parvati sees Hermione and she's super bright and fake and friendly, and then

Hermione is even more bright and fake and friendly back and Harry can only think, 'Girls are very strange sometimes.' I thought about that. I'm like, 'No, that's growth.' I was mentioning earlier how you see growth in the chapter. No, Parvati has thought about it; she knows that how she laughed at Hermione was immature and wrong, and plus, they're roommates. You can't do that, and this is her way of saying, "I know what I did, and we're just going to prioritize the fact that we still have to be together in school." Nobody's fooled, but it's an apology.

JC: Yeah, absolutely. Without putting too much of a gender lens on it, it feels like something that's very familiar to me.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: When I talk to people at work -- even someone that I recently had some intense email exchange with -- I will be over-the-top friendly, and they will return it. There's that way of reacting, like 'We're really going to make sure that everything is going to be fine, and we're still going to be able to work together and we're not going to let this linger.' It feels very much like that to me, too. It was very recognizable.

Lorrie: Yeah. It's like 'I'm going to make an effort.' Yeah. Of course, it has to be awkward, but if it weren't awkward, then it wouldn't be an acknowledgment.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: That's so complicated. What's going on there is so subtextual and deliberately so, as opposed to the textual, where Hermione drops that she's dating Cormac now. AAAHHHH!

JC: I love the description of Ron resurfacing from his makeout session with Lavender in the middle of the Great Hall and the description of the sound being like a plunger was pulled out of a drain, which is obviously a tremendous... not true, but also funny, if you can imagine it.

Lorrie: Yeah. I do like the way that this author can show you exactly how much making out is going on without any of it being remotely sexy in a voyeuristic way. "While this is happening..." Hermione, of course, is ignoring that because that's why she's doing this. She's being artificial and giggly and oh, gosh...

JC: Very non-Hermione. She's totally putting on an act. Yeah.

Lorrie: And Lavender and Parvati are totally falling for it, right? *gasps*

JC: See, when I read it this time, too, I wondered if Parvati... It felt a little bit like Parvati was in on it, that Parvati knew about it in advance and was giving Hermione an opportunity to talk about it. I don't know. It was kind of hard to pick apart exactly who knew what when there.

Lorrie: Yeah. Obviously, they all have to deal with the Lavender/Ron romance, and none of any of it is a secret to anyone how Hermione might feel about it, so now this. Then she's like, "Wow, you really like Quidditch players," and she goes, "I like *really good* Quidditch players."

JC: That was so satisfying to me!

Lorrie: Oh, my God! To be fair to Ron, he's actually not worse than Cormac McLaggen at Quidditch, but we all know where Ron's insecurities are.

JC: Oh, wow. It was like a dagger right into the sore spot.

Lorrie: Oh...

JC: I don't know, I found it extremely satisfying. I guess I'm still pissed off at Ron, because I was like, 'Oh, there. Dagger. Yes.'

Lorrie: So Hermione does this poisonous thing, which obviously, she must have been unbearably unhappy. I love this sentence: "Harry was left to ponder in silence the depths to which girls would sink to get revenge."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, God...

JC: For sure, but also, it says a lot about Hermione's confidence and that she could say, 'Okay, I need to ask someone to this party, and who would piss Ron off the most for me to ask? What would have caused Ron the most pain? That one,' and then have the confidence to go, 'I can get him to go to the party with me.' Damn, Hermione. I did not have that confidence at that age, for sure.

Lorrie: He had been pursuing her.

JC: Had he?

Lorrie: Yeah, earlier in the book.

JC: Okay.

Lorrie: He was interested, and you can just imagine how he would be the absolute last person that she'd be interested back in. Ugh.

JC: Yeah. Personality-wise, he is not someone that she would be interested in, but yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. He had telegraphed his interest and he is impervious to insult. Okay, she can summon that, and then we get the party scene.

JC: Ah, yes. The whole little bit in here with the vampire named Sanguini... I'm sorry, that is the stupidest name for a vampire that has ever existed.

Lorrie: It's so funny.

JC: The girls standing around and giggling, and the vampire drifting toward the girls... I had this moment of thinking, 'Is this a dig at *Twilight*?' because *Twilight* was kind of popular at the same time as this came out, so I was like, 'Is it intentional?'

Lorrie: It's not.

JC: 'Or is it just the whole "this is vampires" or whatever?'

Lorrie: It's not. I had the same question and I looked it up, and this was published before *Twilight* was published.

JC: Okay, alright.

Lorrie: It was the same year, but in the whole process of writing and getting edited and whatever, they were being done almost at the same time. This came out before *Twilight* came out, so it's much more that it's funny that vampires are romanticized, and here's a vampire; he's not sexy at all.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: What is wrong with these girls, and how creepy is it that his biographer has brought a vampire into a school?

JC: What... yeah. This party is an example of just how society is falling down. Apparently, this is the kind of party Slughorn used to have back in, I don't know, the fifties, sixties. It feels like a *Mad Men*-era thing where there's people smoking and all kinds of celebrities have come in. This is not how schools work.

Lorrie: No.

JC: No one can just walk into a school anymore. Granted, this is also twenty years ago, but even twenty years ago -- at least in the United States; who knows about the U.K. -- you still could not just walk into a school, because I was going into schools at the time and observing teachers. You had to go to the front office, you had to give them an ID, they had to put you in their system, they had to give you a special name tag that you would wear. These people couldn't just come into the school, but we also know that there's a lot of security because of everything happening, so Dumbledore approved this.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: All of this.

Lorrie: And he's nowhere to be found. Dumbledore is not at this party.

JC: Right, so whatever level security there was, Slughorn was able to bring in questionable people to a school.

Lorrie: Yeah. It's the Slughorn disreputable zone where if you hire him, you hire the whole thing. But there's something else, though, that when you in particular, JC, talk about how things are done at schools, you are not only in the U.S., but you're in public schools.

JC: True.

Lorrie: I don't know that much about private schools except that the same regulations don't apply, and then there's a specific kind of exclusive-for-rich-people private school that have their own traditions going back centuries and mores of social class... I don't even know. I don't know, but the regulations and safeguards that you're talking about... I can imagine there being wealthy private schools with longstanding traditions where the fifth-generation rich alums will say, "That's not how we do things here. We do it this way." This party feels like one of those. This is a whole world. Everyone who's there seems to know that those are the ways that

you behave at these parties; they've been to them before. Harry and the other students are coming in for the first time; now that this is the first time they're old enough to be invited to one like this, they're looking around like, 'Oh, so this is what people do at these things, huh?' if Slughorn thought they were cool enough to be initiated.

JC: Into this sort of wizarding society.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, my gosh.

Lorrie: People with influence, people networking. Ugh...

JC: And that's definitely what's happening here.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's very much like... I'm trying to think of... what's the -- See, I don't run in these circles at all...

Lorrie: Exactly. Me neither, yeah.

JC: Maybe something like an Elks Lodge, but better and at a higher level. I don't know what happens in these places.

Lorrie: Right. Right, and it's reassuring to know that our protagonist, Harry, has brought Luna with him as an external sign of how little he's interested in being part of this world.

JC: Oh, yeah.

Lorrie: 'I'm bringing this talisman of a date who is completely immune to all of this bullshit.'

JC: And that is Luna's power. Luna is immune to all of the social maneuvering and everything else. That's Luna's superpower.

Lorrie: Oh, so refreshing.

JC: It is super refreshing here, and she's a friend to ground him here. Oh, I love it.

Lorrie: The super part of that superpower is that she's even having a genuinely good time.

JC: Yeah! She has great conversations with people. She and Trelawney really hit it off over --

Lorrie: They're enjoying themselves, yes.

JC: Their rabbit-hole conspiracy theories. It's amazing, yeah.

Lorrie: It's wonderful. Ah, so beautiful.

JC: I'm so happy for Luna. I think Luna genuinely has a good night.

Lorrie: Yeah. Yeah, and she got to wear her silver spangled robes that look kind of funny and yay, she got to be pretty. Ah, great. Meanwhile, the biographer that's brought Sanguini starts being a vampire on Harry's fame. "Oh, look, if you just let me, I'll make it so easy for you and you'll just get so much money," and Harry's so, 'When is this conversation over? Go away. No, no, no, no!

JC: I just think about the fact that every time someone else has told Harry's story, it's been awful. I'm actually seeing this throughout the series. Whenever there's a biography, it's wrong; they excuse things, and it's always a political -- I don't read enough biographies to know if this is just the way that they are and that they always are like this, but there's a feeling throughout these books that you really can't trust biographers or biographies, that they have an agenda. Yeah.

Lorrie: It's by nature. Even if you write your own autobiography, by the time it's published, you've changed as a person.

JC: True.

Lorrie: There's always a choice to be made about what truth among many truths do you put your effort into making into the dominant narrative and is that really honest. There's only so honest a human being can be with themselves because we're so complicated.

JC: Right, yeah.

Lorrie: That's just you with yourself, let alone somebody with an agenda. Ugh... What are you going to do? So yeah, not to say that biography is a not-valuable genre; I love biography, but it's a study of that shifting dynamic, always. That's what biographies are, and it's hard to get right. It's very easy to find examples of why this is such a risky endeavor that it can go wrong in so many ways.

JC: For sure. It is interesting, though, that it's very in character for Harry to be like, "Nope, not interested."

Lorrie: Oh, boy.

JC: We've talked a lot on this podcast about how he wants his own story, right? He's always looking for little pieces of his own story, and when he gets them, he treasures them and holds them really close to his heart. He doesn't go around even telling people his story; his story is very personal to him, so it makes a lot of sense that he would be very private about this. The idea of letting someone else, a stranger who wants to make money off of him, in to take that and twist it... God, no, that's not something that Harry would want to do.

Lorrie: Yeah. You're making me remember how there are things that he doesn't even tell Ron and Hermione, like things he saw about his parents. If he's not telling them, he's sure not doing this easy package "as told to biographer" thing.

JC: Also, I was just thinking about the fact that in *Cursed Child*, there's mention that there's lots of books that have been written about Harry, and in that play he's like, "Yeah, no, you can't believe those." Even then, he's still very distrustful of what people write about him.

Lorrie: Well, this brings me to thinking about the author, who currently is just appalling me with how wrong she can be in her public opinions about trans-related issues (they're not even trans issues), but there is a level at which (because she's a person and an author) I still feel happy for her that she doesn't have to deal with the many, many, many books written about her or about her series. I have had people ask me, since I published my Snape book, "Has Rowling read it? Do you know if she's read it?" People have asked me that in good faith and innocence (people who don't think about this much), and my answer, regardless of how I feel about her, has always been, "Oh, my God, I hope not." Not because I want to be protected from her or anything, but you can't live that way. If you have so many books written about you, you have to just cancel them all in your mind and just go and live your life; you can't engage all the time with just how wrong people have gotten you or your books. I've interpreted something about a fictional character she wrote. Does she have to know about this? No! No. That's definitely something that we get to see written into this later book of the series: the way that the author's fame is

writing itself into the scenes that she's writing. She's, at this point, experienced the same kind of notoriety that Harry has in the Wizarding World, and you can only imagine when she has to go to a party like this. Maybe not now -- I don't even know what her life is like now except that it's very, very different (in a yucky way) from anything that I know -- but when I imagine her life of the early 2000s as a superstar fiction writer and she has to go to a party of well-connected people trying to all suck up to her and manipulate her into giving part of her stardom to their pet projects, this is a very mild parody of what it must have been like for her.

JC: Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

Lorrie: So yeah, this is a very strange feeling of being protective of the basic human rights and dignity of somebody who is redefining how badly people can feel disgusted by political changes in somebody they once trusted as a public figure. She is breaking new ground in how disgusting a formerly trusted public figure could be.

JC: Which is saying a lot in this day and age.

Lorrie: Yeah, it is. It sure is. Is it possible to talk about *Harry Potter* the fictional series right now without that coming into consciousness? I don't find it possible. It comes up.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And yeah, this scene of her being a really well-connected person in social situations that I'm not -- No one's asking me to a party like this and I don't want to go, and if I did and I had a Luna, I would be so grateful for having a Luna to bring with me as protection.

JC: Yeah. The closest experience I've had is that there was a time when my partner was really high up in a company he was working for, and we would have to occasionally go to and then host dinner events with other bigwigs; it was the kind of thing where I was the only partner/wife, female partner/person/wife. They were all men; let's just be real. I was the only one of the wives who had a career.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: The rest of them were managing households and things, and when our son was little, they would ask about his nanny. We had a nanny because I was teaching part-

time, so we had a nanny who came part-time; it was just someone locally through a service we found and we paid her by the hour, and she was great. She became a part of our family for a while -- she was awesome -- but I remember, especially in New York, meeting with people and we would talk about, "Oh, yeah, this, that," and they're like, "Oh, you must have a nanny," and I had to go, 'Goddamn, I have to say yes to that,' but I was like, "Yeah." Then they would say, "Where is she from?"

Lorrie: Oh, no, yeah.

JC: Which took me a while to understand what they were asking...

Lorrie: What they were saying, yeah.

JC: I was like, "Austin, Texas." What? I didn't understand...

Lorrie: "What do you mean?" Yeah.

JC: Yeah. It took a while. There's just all this weird yuckiness learning how to behave in that environment, and I hated going to those things because I always walked away feeling not that I didn't belong, but that everyone looked at me like they didn't understand anything about me. I don't know, it was very weird.

Lorrie: Well, you could go take a shower after that.

JC: That's true, yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, God, yuck. So yeah, that's happening, and then Harry sees Hermione; she looks disheveled because she's physically running away from Cormac.

JC: This part is really disturbing to me, and it's being played for laughs. I'm really unhappy with the author for playing this for laughs.

Lorrie: I didn't feel like it was played for laughs. It felt quite accurate. Okay, Hermione is trying to avoid date rape.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: That's what's happening.

JC: Yeah, and she's looking disheveled because a boy has pulled her into the corner and is trying to get his hands all over her and will not take no for an answer. That's what's happening here.

Lorrie: Had she been more experienced, she would have known that that was a danger of trying to harness the awfulness that is a guy like that to be part of her agenda to get back at Ron, because Cormac is Cormac-ing.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Ugh.

JC: It also hammers home to me how he is from a certain echelon of society where he could just do that and he just expects to get his way and that's how you treat women, right? That's what it's all about, and it really draws a contrast to Hermione's experience with Viktor Krum, because we never got any indication that he was anything like that.

Lorrie: No.

JC: They had a friendship and they really respected each other, and they still apparently write each other.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Cormac just seems like he's that kind of guy, that kind of white, British, wealthy, entitled boy who's going to end up date raping women in college.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: That's what he feels like here. I don't know. The first time I felt it; I feel like the movie did it this way, and I kind of saw it again. I felt like it was played to be funny at Hermione's expense.

'Oh, she's so dumb. Look, she should have known better' is what it feels like to me, and it could be because I've been in this situation and then people treated me that way. "Why did you put yourself in that situation?"

Lorrie: And Harry does say that. Harry says, "It serves you right for the scheme."

JC: So it's real, but I'm very unhappy about it.

Lorrie: It's real; it's just miserable, yes, and it's too real. Then Hermione (I have to respect this, even though it's awful) says, "I thought he'd annoy Ron most. I debated for a while about Zacharias Smith..." I love that Zacharias Smith is just such an asshole that he's even worse than this date rape guy. Harry's like, "You what?!" and I had that response, too. 'Eww, Zacharias Smith!' She says, "Quidditch! Is that all boys care about?" which to me, that's such a pang that goes right back to the Half-Blood Prince. No, not all boys do, but those boys aren't interested in Hermione either, and it would be nice for her at this particular moment to feel like anybody desired her for herself. Luckily, yes, Viktor Krum once did -- that helps -- but she's having a terrible time and physically running away.

JC: Which is all you can do, at least in my experience at that age, without causing a scene. You just have to run away and get yourself out of the situation, and that's what she's doing. It was just very recognizable to me as something that happened to me when I was almost exactly that age, and it was really disturbing reading it being treated by other people the same way. Ugh...

Lorrie: Yeah, and I can only imagine from Cormac's point of view, he thinks his worldview is the only worldview. I imagine he would be confused that Hermione didn't realize this is what was on offer. Why would she ask him out if she didn't know that this is how things go?

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: You would have to be more worldly and sensitive than Cormac to know that these are not rules. People come from different backgrounds; you could maybe talk to the other person to find out what their expectations are. On the other hand, Hermione's totally using him. What does she want from him? Nothing, and that's not so great either. But yeah, did she have any desire for any human connection with him? Ew, no. Yeah. Unlike Harry asking out Luna, this is a lose-lose-lose situation.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yuck. So the Half-Blood Prince sort of shows up at this party. Trelawney... As a character, her presence worked so well in this scene. She's such the comic relief in a really delightful way, and Slughorn is telling her how Harry is

"instinctive" at Potions "like his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybill -- why even Severus --" And this is so meta: he scoops Snape out of thin air.

JC: With an arm around him and pulls him in. Who else could do that to Snape?

Lorrie: And just knowing how miserable this is.

JC: I can just imagine the look on Snape's face. 'Oh, my God...'

Lorrie: There's nothing that can be done. Yeah, we didn't even know he was at this party until the narrative needed him to be scooped out of thin air. No matter how uncomfortable people might be at this party, when you know that Snape is there, I automatically think, 'Oh, but no one's suffering as much as he is.'

JC: Yeah. This is like an environment that if Harry hates it, Snape hates it so much more.

Lorrie: Yes, and Slughorn neither knows nor cares.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: And how clever is it that with these few words, the author has made the reader wonder, 'How did Snape and Lily negotiate all of the social changes and tensions when they were this age?' "Like his mother, instinctive" at Potions, and then he scoops Snape out... Wow. She just, with a couple of very deft strokes, brings us to this moment where the reader is like, 'Huh.'

JC: Yeah. They were in class together, I assume.

Lorrie: They were this age, and Slughorn's directly comparing them. "Like his mother... Only ever taught a few... why even Severus --" Okay, there was comparison going on, whether or not we readers get to see it, so now we're all wondering. Beautifully done. Then he gets even more meta and he says, "Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!" Of course, we had all been picturing Snape skulking, but are we allowed to say that? All the students laugh at him behind his back, but are we allowed to just say that's what he does? Uh, Slughorn thinks so.

JC: The comment about how Lily was even better at Potions than Severus is interesting to me, because I don't trust that Slughorn could see Snape. I don't trust

that, but also considering that Harry is following Snape's text now, he's obviously brilliant at it.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: Is it that his mother was that much better, or is it that his mother just got the attention that Snape was never going to get?

Lorrie: Yeah. Or is it just --

JC: Or is it just a lie to pull Harry in?

Lorrie: There's some disagreement about this. I firmly believe that Snape was never in the Slug Club. To me, it seems clear that Snape was never part of Slug Club, that you had to be beautiful or promising in some way, and he could definitely have been the top Potions student and still never considered for Slug Club. That's still the dynamic here.

JC: Yeah, yeah.

Lorrie: Knowing that this old Professor can just physically pull him here and there, suddenly Snape seems really like a kid.

JC: Yeah, right. There's something about... Snape would not have been in the Slug Club then, but now he's suddenly either good enough or he's obligated to attend for some other reason. That is really... I could just see him being really resentful of having to be there that night at all.

Lorrie: Ugh... Yeah.

JC: And then to get pulled into this conversation... Oh, God, what a nightmare.

Lorrie: Yeah, although it's still better than the year that Remus Lupin was at the staff table from Snape's point of view, and of course it's much, much better than all the horrible Death Eater meetings he constantly has to go to. This is just another item on his list of onerous duties. Oh, God... So now they're talking about Harry Potter -- apparent natural, instinctive Potions genius -- which Snape knows full well cannot be what's really going on.

JC: Yeah, but I love that he's like, "Really?" He gives a hard look to Harry, and Harry's like, 'Oh no.'

Lorrie: 'I wish I'd learned Occlumency. I wish, I wish...' "I was just talking about Harry's exceptional potion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!" Uh-oh.

JC: "Some credit"?

Lorrie: God...

JC: All of the credit, to be honest, but yeah. All right.

Lorrie: But we don't know that it was him, right? "You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death -- never had a student produced finer on a first attempt, I don't think even you, Severus --" Oh, boy... I do think that means that Snape was a better Potioneer than Lily, but that people are good at things in their own different ways, and that Lily's way was instinctive (instinctual), which we all know -- Snape and everybody knows -- that that is not Harry at Potions.

JC: True.

Lorrie: Harry has that in some fields, not in Potions.

JC: True, true.

Lorrie: And after five years, even though Snape has totally muddled everything by being the worst thing about Harry's Potions classes, he'll never have an accurate view of Harry in Potions. In fact, he has probably fouled Harry's relationship to Potions forever (at least to some degree), but even under those biases, Snape still knows, 'No, Harry's not instinctual about Potions. No, he's not.'

JC: He's instantly like, 'Okay, something is going on here.'

Lorrie: Yeah, so he does Legilimancy on Harry, which Harry feels. He also then sneers at Harry wanting to be an Auror, and that's just petty.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And this is exactly like Hermione laughing at Ron's mustache and Ron making fun of Hermione being eager in class. Here we have Snape, 36 years old, sneering. Oh, boy...

JC: I love that all this tension gets broken by Luna's conspiracy theory craziness, though, and Harry immediately almost spewing his drink out of his nose and being so grateful that she was there to be herself in that moment. Yeah.

Lorrie: This is one of my favorite things: the Rotfang Conspiracy. It's perfect in every way.

JC: Isn't there a wizard rock band called The Rotfang Conspiracy? If not, there should be.

Lorrie: Right, exactly. This tagline: "working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark magic and gum disease."

JC: That is really dumb. I love it.

Lorrie: So here's a horrible post-2020 moment that I had not foreseen feeling.

JC: Okay.

Lorrie: This is not so funny now that RFK Jr. is the head of the CDC.

JC: Ah... Okay, yeah.

Caroline: Hi there, quick interruption from producer Caroline, bringing you errata from Lorrie, who misspoke when she called RFK Jr. the head of the CDC. He is, regrettably, the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Back to your regularly scheduled podcast in 3, 2, 1...

Lorrie: Because he is literally doing this. He is vilifying fluoride in water and he's championing eugenics. He is literally using a combination of Dark magic and gum disease to bring down this country from within.

JC: Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: I'm like, 'Oh, I really thought that this joke was foolproof and that I would never not think it was absurd,' and here we are. Okay, that --

JC: Yeah. Yeah, no, okay, you're right. It's less funny now.

Lorrie: Yeah. We need to clone Luna, obviously. Oh, God, this is awful.

JC: Ugh... How far we have fallen when one of Luna Lovegood's crazy conspiracy theories is actually not that crazy in the world we live in right now.

Lorrie: Oh, God...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. So yes, when real life villains are awfuller than this fantasy stuff...

JC: Than fantasy villains.

Lorrie: Yep. So anyway, cleanse... cleanse. Oh, yes, the next sight that Harry sees is a cleansing sight: it's Draco being dragged by the ear.

JC: By Filch, yeah.

Lorrie: More fodder for Harry's Patronus memories.

JC: It's such an interesting moment because Harry hasn't seen him, because he's been skulking/sneaking around and doing things and no one believes Harry. Harry's been pretty busy, but when he gets a good look at him, he realizes that he looks a little... He's got dark shadows under his eyes, and he looks like he's not taking care of himself and he's not sleeping.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Ohhh... Something's really going on there.

Lorrie: He's not okay. Filch is overjoyed and says he's found Draco "lurking in an upstairs corridor," and Draco is forced to pretend that it's because he was hoping to crash the party. Oh, God... How undignified. Snape hears this and looks at Malfoy "as though both angry and... was it possible?... a little afraid?" This is the real narrative that's going on: Harry being interested in love potions because it might tell him what Draco is up to, Snape enduring this intolerable party where they're talking about his school days because he has to keep his ear open for all of this. The real story is happening now, and Snape thinks about it and says, "Draco, I want a word." Oh, boy... This is Snape's actual job, the thing that Dumbledore put him on this year because if you're going to be a teacher and headmaster taking care of Draco Malfoy, you can't have Dumbledore do it. Snape may fail (and this is not a successful interaction for Snape), but he has less chance of failure than anyone else. "All right, Severus, you're up," and he knows it. He says, "A word," and this time, when Harry goes to eavesdrop and puts on his Invisibility Cloak, it goes

much better for Harry than it did when he tried that on the Hogwarts Express. How did you feel about the conversation that Harry walked in on?

JC: I was trying to remember when I was reading it (because I was reading it and I was like, 'Ooh, they're really learning a lot here') and I don't remember how much I got out of it. The first time, I'd already believed that Harry was right about Draco, but this is nice confirmation that Harry was right. But really, when you know what's really going on, it's all laid out right here (exactly what's happening) and I can't go back and remember how much of that was clear to me on a first read.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. The whole thing is laid out right here, if you know what's happening.

Lorrie: Yeah. It's not mysterious at all, which is in itself surprising. Poor Snape is trying to tell Draco, "You cannot afford mistakes," and Draco's just denying all of it on the face of it (that he didn't give Katie the necklace). Snape is trying to let him say that and then just go back to the conversation and he's not making any headway, and then Draco -- I find this really well-written -- the bravado, how Draco words this in such a childish way because he's just starting. He says, "I know what you're doing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work -- I can stop you!" Snape is trying to Legilimise him, and Draco's like, "I got this brand new tool." Snape pauses for a moment and says, "Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see," which is such a good way of showing that Snape is sensitive to magical signatures. He knows exactly who did this, and of course Draco learns Occlumency much better than Harry did because the circumstances are much simpler. This is a callback to the Spinner's End chapter, when we see that Snape and Bellatrix are each other's opponents in who gets to have influence over Draco's life. With Harry, it's Dumbledore and Voldemort fighting each other. Voldemort wants to be able to use Harry for his own purposes, and Dumbledore wants Harry to be able to live as himself; here we have Bellatrix having quite a lot of influence over Draco, so Snape has to try to leave an avenue of escape open for Draco without revealing his position. Oof... What did you think of the exchange? "What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?" "I'm not trying to conceal anything from *him*, I just don't want *you* butting in!" How did that land?

JC: Yeah. I'm wondering -- I haven't read ahead, and I don't remember -- how quickly Harry figures out who has been talked about there, who is being referred to as '*him*.' Yeah. Snape... I want to know: is this the first conversation that they have had that Harry happens to overhear? Have they had other conversations? Draco's been avoiding Snape, we hear, but is this the first time Snape's really been able to talk to him this entire term? It's a quick conversation and we learn a whole lot about what's been going on between them, but yeah, interesting. Also, the fact that Draco clearly doesn't care about school anymore; he's only here to pretend to go through the motions of being in school just so he can do his task that he's been set by Voldemort. That's the only thing that he cares about now and he doesn't want Snape's help. Does he not want Snape's help because Bellatrix has told him "Don't trust Snape?" Is it a teenage bravado of, "No, it's my task. I'm doing it by myself!" There's a lot of questions I have about how Draco actually... what's happening there in his head as far as who does he think Snape is at this point.

Lorrie: One thing we know for sure is that the way he's wording it is so childlike, like the teenager fighting against a parent figure. "I don't want *you* butting in!" Then I thought maybe what he's saying is literally true: that Bellatrix taught him this with Snape in mind on purpose, saying, "Snape is petty and he's going to try to get in your way, and you've been tapped for greater things now. You report directly to the Dark Lord now." If that was Bellatrix's approach, it was a really good one because Draco is already primed to be defiant about this new promotion.

JC: We talked a lot about how he wants to be the protagonist. He wants to be important, and he's been bested by Harry Potter at every turn. This isn't even about Harry, but it's more about Draco's wanting to be important.

Lorrie: Yeah, and now that his dad's in jail, he really has to step up. So yeah, it's kind of surprising we get to find out that Snape has been issuing these orders all along for Draco to come talk to him and Draco has just been ignoring them, and then Harry is in the position of overhearing the way that Draco and Snape openly acknowledge that Draco has favored status where Snape says, "Had anybody else failed to come to my office..." and then Draco just sneers at him and says, "So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!" Oh, I do very much identify with the pauses that Snape has to go through as he takes in being faced with a teenager and

has to think of what to say next. "You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things." No, Draco's right.

JC: Yeah, especially when Draco's like, "Yeah, report me to Dumbledore! I dare you! Make it easy for me."

Lorrie: "What are you going to do about this?" Yeah. "I am important, and what are you going to do about it?" and poor Snape has to try to make contact somehow. "Listen to me. I'm trying to help you." Oh, God. "I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco --" Really, his life kind of sucks and he's genuinely worried for Draco here, right? He's worried for himself because he made this vow, and he's conscious the whole time. Everything about this is something that as readers, we think he's going to have to report all of this to Dumbledore, which is similar to how he did the year before about Harry: that he would do these Occlumency lessons and then he would have to report back to Dumbledore, "I saw visions of the Death Eaters in Harry's head. This is the level of danger we're in." Everything here... He's trying to maintain a connection with Draco at the same time that he has very clearly in mind what his job is here and that he does have support. He's going to go tell Dumbledore -- and that's good that he's not going to be alone and trying to figure out what to do about this kid -- but he's thinking about the promise he made to Narcissa and he's trying to stay undercover the whole time. If he doesn't maintain some connection with this kid, nobody can. There's no one else.

JC: Right. He even brings Crabbe and Goyle into it. He's like, "I've been trying to get them to pass Defense Against the Dark Arts, and boy, you'd better be choosing better henchmen than that if you want to survive this."

Lorrie: I find that so touching and sad because he has taken on... By himself, he's the only one who cares about these boys whose fathers are in prison for being Death Eaters. They were already vulnerable. They were already at-risk youth, and now that their dads are in prison, they are just gleefully adapting to the new day they think is coming.

JC: Which it kind of is.

Lorrie: Yes, it is, and he is fronting as somebody who is part of that evil while trying to stay undercover as someone who wants to retain some humanity for these

kids, even if it's completely delusional to hold out some hope that they have futures. Then there's the completely common, everyday position of being the only teacher that cares about some students that are failing everything. If anybody is marked to be a failure and have a terrible life, it's Crabbe and Goyle, so if almost all the teachers have given up on them... That's a thing that happens, and you can be in Snape's position as the one person who hasn't given up on them, knowing that there's no guarantee. It may turn out that all your colleagues are looking at you like, "I told you you were wasting your time." Yeah, that might happen, and that's not why you do it, right? You do it because everybody is worth somebody caring that you get a chance. This is one overworked man, Snape, here.

JC: I don't know if (at the time this was written) the world was a different place, but it made me think at the time a lot about working in high schools where there was a lot of gang activity. We would just watch kids get sucked into that, and it was really hard to pull them out. I remember, in particular, at the high school that I taught at, there were male teachers who would try so hard to reach out to those boys and try to get them involved in something that would keep them from doing this, and then these boys would just slip away. Yeah. The heartbreak of that as these teachers were trying, so it makes me think about that. Not that that's limited to any particular time; it was just particularly in the nineties. That was a lot of what was happening around the U.S. in schools. I don't know if it was the same or what the similarities were in the U.K., but it certainly reminds me of that time when I was a high school teacher. Oh, the same thing with girls, honestly... They would be fresh-faced little girls, and then they'd start coming to school with a full face of makeup, and then by the end of the year they'd be pregnant. That was the same kind of thing.

Lorrie: Yeah. As somebody who cares and wants to open up even the thought/idea of some alternative for the kids, you cannot base your effort on any guarantee or success. Suppose you actually get through to them; there's not going to be evidence of whether that worked or not for quite a while. You don't know if something you said is going to turn out to be in their mind twelve years from now and be, like, the *thing*. You don't know. It's very thankless. You have to get your energy for doing this kind of work from somewhere other than feedback from the teenager in question, who's staring at you with open hostility and skepticism, and also probably a profound lack of respect for how old and unattractive you are. Yeah.

Snape is trying and quite truthfully pointing out that if Draco wants to succeed in whatever stupid, nefarious plan he's in, Crabbe and Goyle are not the way to get there either. When he says, "I took the Unbreakable Vow for you," that should have been like a big thunderclap moment, a big revelation ('Wow, somebody cared'), and it's so accurate that Draco's response is just like, "Well, looks like you'll have to break it then."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: That's so true to life.

JC: Yeah. "Then just die, I guess." Okay, Draco...

Lorrie: "Is that supposed to impress me?" Yeah, actually, it is. Draco should be moved that somebody did. Well, we do find out later that yes, it does have an effect, but in real life, whether it has an effect on him or not, it's still good to pass this information on. It might reach him later emotionally. Draco says, "I don't need your protection! It's my job, he gave it to me, and I'm doing it..." He is gambling. He feels like he's jumped to the head of the queue. He's under Voldemort's protection; he doesn't need anything. Snape desperately says, "If you tell me what you're trying to do, I can assist you." Oh, Snape has so totally lost before he even opens his mouth.

JC: Ugh, yeah.

Lorrie: "Yeah, right. I've got all the assistance I need, thanks. I'm not alone."

JC: Which is interesting, too. That's interesting information for Harry, right?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: At this point, Harry doesn't quite know what Draco's -- I think we think we're sure that Snape knows; he's just trying to get Draco to confide in him and trust him, but Harry doesn't know. Now Harry knows, so the things that I'm pretty sure Harry now knows are that Draco is a Death Eater and that he is doing a task for Voldemort. I think Harry interprets the '*him*' as Voldemort, he knows that Draco is pushing Snape away, and Harry at this point believes that Snape is on Voldemort's side still. He knows that Draco is working with Death Eaters outside the castle...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And that Snape is desperately trying to intervene in that.

Lorrie: Yeah, and that Draco is sure that he has outranked and outstripped Snape so that Snape's attempts are really just laughable. Then Draco says this revealing kid thing: "What does it matter? Defense Against the Dark Arts -- it's all a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us need protecting against the Dark Arts --" Again, it's that combination of bravado and childishness as he's asking Snape, because certainly that's the line he's being sold. This painfully brought to mind a political scene that played out in the U.S. in the past month, where shortly before being demoted, Kristi Noem was questioned by Congress. There was a congresswoman, Becca Balint, who during the hearings said to Kristi Noem, "You are the Secretary of DHS for now, and you think you are immune from accountability, but I promise you this: one day, he is not going to be president anymore. He's not going to be in charge, and when that day comes, we will still be here and we will still be seeking accountability. And in hearings like this, we are going to continue to prove your guilt." That landed; you could see Kristi Noem's pathetic face knowing that this is true. How tragic and painful it must be for Snape to look at this sixteen-year-old boy who's just entering -- he's got one toe in on this path and Snape knows how it all ends, and what do you do with somebody who's just entered like this? Oh, boy. Snape tries and he says, "It's an act that is crucial to success, Draco! Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I had not known how to act?" This is Snape giving advice to Draco regardless of who's on what side. 'This life that you've chosen... Things happen.'

JC: It was also reminding me of listening to Republicans talking about ICE raids and this idea of, "Well, why should it bother me? They're never going to hurt me. I've done nothing to get their attention, so what do I care if they're at the airports working security? It's not going to bother me." That kind of "people like us" comment that Draco made... That's what it made me think about, too: people who think that they've been elevated to some protected class of society, the confidence that they have that they're going to be protected, and Snape's reminder of "No."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: If you allow it to be stratified in this way, it could flip on you at any moment.

Lorrie: The naivete is hard to watch, and then you have to figure out -- I guess just put it out there -- that this is not the first time in history this has happened and you may need some advice later on. "No, I don't! Everything will be fine and perfect!" Snape is losing the battle here. "Then why not confide in me, and I can --" "I know what you're up to! You want to steal my glory!" Oh, gosh... AAAAHHHH! You wonder if Bellatrix put that or reinforced that notion with Draco.

JC: That is so not Snape.

Lorrie: Right? Oh, my God.

JC: I don't care. Even if you're a person who hates Snape, I don't think anyone would say that that's Snape's motivation, regardless.

Lorrie: Yeah. It's so tailored to that newly-promoted teenager feeling. Now that Draco is old enough to be effective -- and not just a kid, but to be given real jobs -- how important is this old teacher of his, anyway? Is Draco now... does he outrank Snape? Well, let's see. Let's find out. That is definitely the Slughorn-like stratification that Voldemort employs among his Death Eaters. Voldemort depends on this whole stratification of "Impress me, and then you'll be favored," and of course we know that, with the exception of Barty Crouch, Jr., this is a false promise and that Voldemort very much enjoys watching his Death Eaters shank each other trying to get his approval and he thinks it's hilarious. Snape wholeheartedly adopts that as part of his cover as a Death Eater -- acts like he totally buys into that and smirks when he gets to outrank Bellatrix and whatever -- so it's understandable that Bellatrix believes that, like all the other Death Eaters, Snape cares about this economy.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Snape would be failing if he made it so that Draco didn't believe this of him, so Snape has to stand there and take this insult. Then he gets all cold and he says, "You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your father's capture and imprisonment has upset you, but --" Okay, no, Snape is just trying to take care of these at-risk boys. Oh, geez... And that's not at all where Draco's mind is. This is... Yeah. If Snape doesn't succeed in reaching Draco through this, then he and Dumbledore will have failed in their genuine desire to reach all of these lost boys, just like Dumbledore failed with Snape at this age. Totally did not bother to reach

out to him, totally made things worse, has learned that Dumbledore can't be the one to reach out to Draco now. Snape, you're it. If it works, great. They have tried to leave a path open, but of course you go into this work knowing that success is unlikely and what the other side is promising is so difficult to counter. People like security; people like feeling important and protected.

JC: Especially people who feel like there was some injustice done to them, yeah. Draco has had a chip on his shoulder all this time.

Lorrie: So yeah, Harry has a lot to think about now.

JC: Yep.

Lorrie: Party's still going on. God...

JC: Yeah. Once again, just like with previous events like this, not the best night for Harry Potter.

Lorrie: Well, in some ways, it's not bad because he has gotten confirmation about stuff that he was already thinking about.

JC: I guess not the best night in the sense of it didn't turn out the way he anticipated. It went another direction, but it seems like every time at Hogwarts when there is something like this, it's never just a party or never just a gathering. There's always something that's going to advance the plot.

Lorrie: Yeah, something really high stakes. The next chapter is called A Very Frosty Christmas.

JC: Oh-ho! Ooh, so all the Christmas stuff? I kind of remember what happens over the Christmas break, but also this is their last Christmas at Hogwarts...

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Because a year from now, they'll be in a very different situation.

Lorrie: Yeah. Oh, boy...

JC: Yeah, and I hope this does not say anything for us and the world that we live in, but it probably does.

Lorrie: There's just no way to know, is there?

JC: There's no way to know.

Lorrie: Plant whatever seeds you can.

JC: Yes. Well, yeah. On that cheery note....

Lorrie: Yep. Okay.

JC: A [Very] Frosty Christmas, all right.

Lorrie: Yep.

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