



Transcript

Episode 6.16

Book 6, Chapter 16: A Very Frosty Christmas

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 Sixteen: A Very Frosty Christmas.

Lorrie: A Very Frosty Christmas. Harry spends Christmas at the Burrow with Fleur, Remus and a surprise visitor: Rufus Scrimgeour. Here we are at the halfway point of the book and the school year, so we are checking in on what it's like for Ron and Harry to be just barely on this side still of the kid/adult divide.

JC: Oh, yeah.

Lorrie: Right? Because at the beginning of this book, Harry's friends would not believe his hunches about Draco. Now that's starting to change.

JC: I think I really enjoyed that scene at the beginning where they're doing one of the most odious cooking tasks, which is prepping vegetables, right?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Especially sprouts, which is a thing that kids typically don't like. I love them as an adult, but kids typically hate them, so cutting the stem and peeling off all those leaves...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, my God, and it's a mountain that it's described as. You can just see them standing there at the sink. It's funny too, because this feels like a thing that Mrs. Weasley could have done with a flick of her wand, but no, she's assigned this task to these two boys to keep them busy because it's a snowy day. I just thought, 'Oh, my God, that's amazing.' Yeah. It doesn't have to be done by two underage wizards by hand, but that's how it's happening.

Lorrie: Right, and there's just so many of them.

JC: Oh, yeah.

Lorrie: Well, how else are you going to feed a house full of that many people?

JC: Right, yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, there are quite a few people, too. Every bed is full and some people are sleeping in corners, which is very much like a family gathering at the holidays of a large family. I do find it funny that Mrs. Weasley is splitting up Bill and Fleur, and I'm assuming that they sleep together elsewhere.

Lorrie: All the time.

JC: It's just kind of funny. Mrs. Weasley is still not happy about this engagement.

Lorrie: Not at all. Yeah. The family dynamics are very comfortably rough. Yes, this is a big Christmas, so of course there's the new daughter-in-law that's not fitting in and people coming in with their own preoccupations. It felt very normal that way. Harry tells Ron that Snape took an Unbreakable Vow to help Draco, and Ron (on behalf of all of us readers) has a really hard time wrapping his brain around something that huge. Yes, this is a really big deal. Then Ron tells the story about how, when he was five, Fred and George almost got him to make one.

JC: Fred and George are, what, a year older than Ron?

Lorrie: They're two years older.

JC: Two years older, so they were seven and Ron was five. This sounds very much -- not to put too much gender on it -- like something that brothers would do to each

other. The stereotypical little brother... "How did you break your arm?" "Well, my brother dared me to jump off the roof."

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Ugh!

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: So it feels very typical of that, but also there's a bit of an Addams Family vibe around Fred and George often where they do a lot of dark shit, but it's played for laughs.

Lorrie: And there's two of them!

JC: And there's two of them. Oh, poor Mrs. Weasley...

Lorrie: Yeah. Well, it was Arthur who found them.

JC: Oh, and the fact that they say that even their dad was...

Lorrie: Oh, my goodness, yes.

JC: Incensed. Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Yeah. If he hadn't found them, they might have succeeded.

JC: But that made me wonder: could small children really...? There's magic there, so could small children really do that?

Lorrie: Well, it's one of those things where you don't know what would happen if an unqualified wizard got some of it done. What would happen? I don't know. Not the intended result, but maybe in an even worse way, and how are you going to fix it? What exactly happened here? 'I don't know.'

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: So yeah, this is setting up this theme of kids not knowing how dangerous some magic is and how they need adult limits so that they don't accidentally kill each other, a theme that is only going to build in this volume. George then says he's off to impress a very pretty girl in the Muggle village because he has card tricks that are almost like real magic, and that's threatening, too. Okay, that's really sobering. How easily could he take advantage of this? What is it when wizards and

Muggles get together? All of this... There's so much uneasy danger that you're aware of. This 'becoming an adult' business... But yeah. Meanwhile, Harry and Ron are maturing in a good way because they can predict, with pure accuracy, exactly what Mr. Weasley and Dumbledore would say about what Harry overheard.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: That Snape's just trying to find out what Malfoy's up to.

JC: Which is a very reasonable assumption on the part of people -- on the part of everyone, to be honest.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Yeah. I'm also very relieved that Ron is believing Harry about Malfoy now.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Harry has been this lone voice of "Malfoy is up to something" for months, and everyone's going, "Oh, Harry, you're being silly." Now, people are starting to believe him, which is a relief.

Lorrie: Partly, it's like, "Draco? That incompetent little twit? But if he were doing something that serious, then we'd all be in trouble because he doesn't know what he's doing. He can't be!"

JC: "*Him*? Voldemort would send *him*?" Yeah.

Lorrie: "That would be like one of us doing it." Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Uh-huh. We also find out from Harry's thoughts that Hermione disappeared from Slughorn's party, or so he had been informed by an irate McLaggen, and I was surprised to find I felt really bad for McLaggen. I was not expecting that feeling, but I thought he was used. Why does somebody that you've been interested in ask you out to a party? You think, 'Oh, maybe they want me. Maybe they want to have a good time together.' She's been at these club gatherings with him all semester and she asks him out to the big party and acts like they're dating. No, he was totally like... That's not okay. I felt bad for him. I'm sorry.

JC: I didn't, but I do get it. I get what you're saying. I don't feel bad for him at all, but also, I think that's very normal for this age as well. 'I like this person. What does that mean I want to do with them?' They had very different expectations about what that would look like. Hermione's prior experience was with Krum, and I think that if McLaggen had turned out to be a good conversation partner and was actually interested in talking to Hermione and then she just ditched him, I would feel really bad for him. But nah, he was kind of an asshole, and he was very much about 'me, me, me' and talking about himself. He didn't ask her any questions about herself, and all he wanted to do was make out with her in a corner and then talk about himself. Yeah, I don't know. I don't feel bad for him. Hermione was like, "No, this was a mistake." She could have said something to him rather than just... but that's also very real for this age, because what would she say in the face of this large guy who has already shown that he's not afraid to grab her and push her in a corner? Better to run away. I get it.

Lorrie: Well, I didn't really think about it until this read, but it is so similar to her getting in over her head with the centaurs. The reason she chose McLaggen is because she knew that they wouldn't get along, and that Ron would see this and be threatened by how much larger and more bullheadedly masculine McLaggen is. She harnessed that power by asking him out, and then oh, she doesn't have what it takes to control this. The centaurs didn't like being used by her, and it's not a surprise. In no way was she surprised that he turned out to be the terrible date that he was; that's why she chose him. The upshot is that there are many bad teen dating behaviors revealed in this chapter that remind me of things that I did that are bad and embarrassing.

JC: Oh, same. Full same.

Lorrie: *shudders*

JC: Yeah, yeah. Full same.

Lorrie: Yeah. At that age also, it's easy to not be nice to other people just because you're unhappy. Ugh... Anyway, they're not comfortable memories.

JC: For sure, for sure. But I get that. I get it. I totally get where Hermione is. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. My big surprise was that I didn't expect to identify with a position of being some kind of really predictable weirdo that would get asked out to fulfill a role in somebody else's drama when I realized, 'Oh, I can see how nobody wants that.'

JC: Yeah, that's true. He seems like he's not self-aware. McLaggen is not self-aware enough to have been able to foresee that. Luna was kind of similar. Not that Harry was trying to... Well, Harry picked Luna partly to get everybody else off his back, but partly then just to be like, 'I'm not available. Leave me alone,' and Luna understood that. She had no illusions going in that she was fulfilling a role here. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. He asked her because he likes her and they were getting along.

JC: Yeah. It was like, "Yeah, you're my friend. Come to this big party with me so I don't have to deal with all of these people trying to get me to go."

Lorrie: "Save me from these people!"

JC: "Save me!" Yeah.

Lorrie: "You wouldn't want to be in this position either." Yeah.

JC: Could be the start of a great fake dating story.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. It feels like that kind of premise. "I don't want to... Will you be my date? Because I don't want to..." 'And then, they fell in love...' Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. We also get the update from Mr. Weasley that Dumbledore apparently went to Scrimgeour to ask personally for the release of Stan Shunpike, because having him be held for PR purposes is so vile and all they want is some scapegoat to make it look like the Ministry is doing something. Yeah, not even Dumbledore going to Scrimgeour has helped that situation at all.

JC: It's depressing but also very realistic that the regime has changed, but all the things going wrong and being done wrong have not changed, right?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, but that's real. That is how the world seems to work. Now there's someone who's actually trying to work against Voldemort in charge, and has anything really changed? No. The Ministry is just as incompetent as they were before, and they're abusing their power and they're harming people in the name of good media. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and this is considered to be an expense that they can afford.

JC: Right, that some people are just expendable and that's okay. Yeah.

Lorrie: The fact that it's ruining an individual person's life who did nothing wrong... They're just writing it off.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Ugh...

JC: In the midst of all this, I think the setting of the scene is so interesting because it's Christmas Eve; everybody is sitting in this family room/living room, and they're all being forced to listen to Mrs. Weasley's choice of Christmas music (which is her favorite singer), and she keeps turning up the volume when they try to have conversations over it. As a parent, as a mom who has tried really hard to make holidays feel special for my family, I could kind of relate to Mrs. Weasley there. I tried so hard (especially when my kid was younger) to set up some traditions of things because I grew up in an extended family and there were lots of traditions and things that I looked back on fondly. We don't live anywhere near extended family and my kid's an only child, so I thought, 'I want to create these so that when he looks back, he's going to have something.' We're not religious, so it's not like these are religious things at all, but we put up a Christmas tree and we do all the Christmas stuff. There have been so many times when I have said, "Here's what I want to do. We're going to put up the Christmas tree and we're going to play Christmas music, and we're going to have hot chocolate," and I'm the only person who's enthusiastic about this. I can just see the look on my partner and my son's faces and they're humoring me. Then there's a point at which they're like, "Are we done now?" and I'm so hurt because I was trying so hard. I feel for Molly here, but also it's funny because I see myself there. I would be totally turning up the volume on the Christmas music. "Come on, sing along!"

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, yes.

Lorrie: Yeah. So who do you think... When you read about Celestina Warbeck, is there a singer that you have in mind?

JC: I kind of think Celine Dion.

Lorrie: That's exactly what I always think.

JC: With the warbling and... I'm just imagining Celestina Warbeck pounding her chest to get the high note out and having a residency wherever wizards have residencies. Yeah.

Lorrie: And that she's been a mainstay in the culture for decades already. But really, if she's not your thing, there's no putting her on mute.

JC: Oh, yeah.

Lorrie: There's nothing to do but wait it out.

JC: For sure, for sure. And the lyrics of these songs are so cringy.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, my gosh, yeah. But I also do like that the setting of this is this explosion of Christmas decorations. Ginny has magicked up a bunch of paper chains, so the vision is almost a spider web of paper chains and they're trapped; they can't go anywhere. Then also, the image of the garden gnome that Fred and George have Stupefied, spray-painted, and put on the tree... It's really dark.

Lorrie: Yes, it is.

JC: Wow. That was their contribution to the holiday decorations here, which was... Ooh.

Lorrie: Well, if that gnome hadn't bitten one of them, it would have been spared.

JC: That's what Fred is thinking, for sure.

Lorrie: That was one of my favorite cosplays I've ever seen at a Harry Potter convention: somebody who dressed in a gold leotard with gold face makeup, angel wings, and a very grumpy expression, and it was so funny.

JC: Oh, my gosh. That's fun. I love that kind of cosplay, by the way, where people take one moment and recreate it so faithfully that you look at it and you go, "Oh, I know exactly what that is."

Lorrie: That's so funny.

JC: Yeah. Why cosplay as one of the main characters when you could do that? It's amazing.

Lorrie: Right, and then she just went around the whole con complaining, exactly like you would if you had been spray-painted gold and stuck on a tree.

JC: Oh, my gosh, yeah. I also envision the tree jammed up the gnome's ass. That's also what I'm imagining Fred and George have done. It's like, 'Oh, my God.'

Lorrie: I guess my favorite thing about the cosplay was that, based on her attitude when she was being the gnome, you could totally see why somebody would say, "Oh, my God, shut up and do this." They didn't come into this with a good attitude either.

JC: Oh, wow. But yeah, that's the setting. Then finally, the music is turned down and everyone can talk, but then we're having really important talks about politics and what's happening in the world. As you would at a gathering of extended family at a holiday, eventually someone's going to bring up politics.

Lorrie: Harry does go ahead and tell Mr. Weasley what he overheard between Snape and Malfoy, who reacts exactly as Harry and Ron predicted, but Lupin butts in; he eavesdrops and he butts in. Then we get this fascinating interlude with Lupin (who's been really off-page for almost the entire book) where the author uses Lupin and his reliability, his trustworthiness as a character, to establish some of her goals for what the reader is supposed to believe and trust, and also to cause some misdirection. The first thing that the author has Lupin state... Lupin restates the premise. "It isn't our business to know (what Dumbledore is up to and what he thinks of Snape and Malfoy). It's Dumbledore's business. Dumbledore trusts Severus, and that ought to be good enough for all of us." It's this really clear mathematical equation, right? Okay, so that's established, and we know that the two characters who say this really succinctly are Lupin and Hermione; they are

characters that have been established for us, the readers, as being trustworthy. They have a record of seeing what's happening and making their choices.

JC: I do love that he states it so succinctly. I don't have the book in front of me, but it's something like, "Either you trust Dumbledore about Snape or you don't, and I trust Dumbledore," which sort of is begging the question: "So Harry, do you really trust Dumbledore or not?"

Lorrie: Right.

JC: Yeah, and Harry, at the end of this chapter, confirms that he's Dumbledore's man.

Lorrie: Yeah. Okay...

JC: It does put that thought in Harry's head. 'Do I really trust Dumbledore? What does that mean to trust Dumbledore so completely?'

Lorrie: Right. That's the long game that Dumbledore and Snape are playing: they're going to stake everything on a lifetime of Dumbledore building up trustworthiness so that they can cash it in to help Snape further his double agency later. Yeah, they're really saving up for that one big payoff. The relationship between Lupin and Harry is so interesting. There are ways in which they can read each other well in a way that nobody else can. Lupin has so much good insight about a lot of things, which makes him, as I said before, an excellent mouthpiece for misdirection about Snape because he's always wrong about Snape. He always speaks from the perspective of somebody who is on the outside about Snape and just making conclusions without knowing details, but then he says this thrillingly even-handed thing: "I neither like nor dislike Severus," which is one of my favorite things that anyone ever says about Snape. For one thing, it shows that Lupin is really mature, but 'liking' is not really the issue. "Well, Snape exists. He has a role, I have a role, you have a role." The evidence is that if Snape had wanted to really damage Lupin, there were obvious things he could have done (such as sabotage the Wolfsbane) and he didn't, so that's not what's going on. Then we get the misdirection: "We both know he wanted my job (that's the author just laying it out there, 'Okay, I'm going to put this misdirection in Lupin's mouth'), but he could have wreaked much worse damage on me by tampering with the potion." True. I also love that Lupin is barely in this volume and it's named after Snape.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: 'Do we have to deal with a werewolf this time?' No, but we get this incredibly fascinating, tantalizing parallel story that while he's been off the page, he's been doing something just as life-altering and triggering as anything these other characters have been doing; we just don't get to see it, but it's very much a 'Meanwhile...' kind of glimpse. And the beautiful thing when Lupin says exactly what Harry and Ron predicted: "It might have been on Dumbledore's orders that Severus question Draco." It's not to shut down Harry and Ron. This time, because they're very nearly seventeen, Lupin is saying that to mentor them. This is how you think when you're an operative; exactly like Snape, Lupin has been living the life of a spy for Dumbledore, and these two are definitely Dumbledore's operatives as well. It's training. He's training them.

JC: I like the moment when Lupin tells Harry, "You have inherited, from Sirius and your dad, this blind hatred prejudice against Snape," just gently pointing out, "Don't just feel this. Stop and think about where it's coming from." That's such a good way to point that out to Harry. "You're so determined to ignore all of the facts here and just go with this gut feeling that Snape is not trustworthy, and think about why you're doing that." It's just good advice.

Lorrie: It's also very merciful, because he's acknowledging, "I know how hard that is. I'm not underestimating how visceral and ancient that blood feud is."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: "You're not making it up." But it is, I think, quite admirable in Lupin's character that, after all that's happened between him and Snape, he can say, "I still have to look at him and see what's happening and assess it." I guess, yeah, Lupin and Snape have gotten past the point of personal grudges against each other. They don't respect each other, but there's no time for that. Lupin, having his life full with this extremely undesirable spy mission, has had plenty of time to think about what Snape is going through also.

JC: Oh, for sure, yeah. Lupin has been through it.

Lorrie: Oh, gosh.

JC: Having to go and work with Fenrir Greyback, Lupin introduces us to... I think we've heard of Fenrir Greyback before, but maybe... I don't think this is the first time, but we learn a lot more about Fenrir Greyback's M.O.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Who he is as a being and what he's about and why he's working for Voldemort... It's done nicely. It's not info dumpy. It's information that, at this point in the story, we really want as a reader. It's like, 'What the heck has Lupin been up to?'

Lorrie: Yeah, and also information that Harry and the readers are now old enough and mature enough to be given. There are some things about this that are so scary you don't just bring them up in everyday conversation. We did see at the beginning of this book, when Draco is at Borgin and Burkes, that he's threatening, "I know Fenrir Greyback. If you don't do what I say, I can bring him here," which has this immediate effect, so we do know that it was something potent. Everything about what Lupin has been up to is so fascinating, because he says that he has been living amongst werewolves and they don't trust him because he's obviously human-coded. There's no denying that -- they can see it on him from miles away -- but he calls them "my fellows, my equals," which is so awful, self-loathing but not delusional. This is so similar to Snape's espionage post being that he has to go back to the high school where he was bullied. This is pure trigger, right? This is such a tall order. This is his trauma, and the identity that he's embracing (that he's been assigned to embrace) is so extraordinarily stigmatized. It's intense.

JC: It's also the fact that he has to go and ingratiate himself not just to other werewolves, but to this werewolf in particular, who's kind of like... I don't know. Is he, like, the Jeffrey Epstein of werewolves?

Lorrie: Yes! Yes, yes.

JC: Yeah. It's this idea that --

Lorrie: No, this is totally Epstein.

JC: Yeah, and he's picking kids to bite to bring in, and then he takes them away and then ruins their lives.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Ugh, yeah, and Lupin is having to be undercover in that situation when that is exactly what happened to him, right?

Lorrie: Yeah. He is a survivor.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, he's a survivor who's going back undercover to expose himself to exactly the kind of thing that made his life hell to begin with. He says Fenrir Greyback "regards it as his mission in life to bite and to contaminate as many people as possible; he wants to create enough werewolves to overcome the wizards... and he specializes in children." This is a particularly virulent example of people who are damaged and therefore want more and more people to be damaged like themselves. In some way, it's making company for yourself where you don't want to be the only one suffering this way.

JC: And that says a lot about -- we've talked about that in Voldemort's case a lot, too. Voldemort wants people to feel what he feels, and Grayback is not that different, right? So this idea that Voldemort is for the ultimate evil in this world... No, he's not. Yes, but he's not the only one in there forming some... Ugh, yeah. I can make parallels in our world, but yeah.

Lorrie: No, Fenrir Greyback is totally honorable mention. He is not as evil as Voldemort -- nowhere near as powerful -- but he gets honorable mention. Yes, he does.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: I love that Lupin just says, "That's why I haven't been able to write, Harry." He, first of all, doesn't even ask if Harry had been sad to not receive mail; he knows, and this is just something he has to do. Like Snape, he can't be close to people because he's a spy and we see an extremely valuable lesson. This is something that I think was really valuable for young readers being introduced to this kind of thinking by this series: what Voldemort has on Fenrir Greyback is just that he's promised him prey in return for his services. Greyback is totally a mercenary; it has nothing to do with Greyback believing in Voldemort's mission, if Greyback even knows or cares what that mission is (purely self-interest). I don't think Greyback even feels used.

JC: He's getting what he wants out of... yeah.

Lorrie: So for anyone who's wondering, why are Christians who believe in not cheating on your wife following Trump? It's not that they think he's faithful to his many wives, right? Why? How?

JC: Right, yeah. People who have talked about how important character is... this is the guy that they're behind. Why? When Harry asks Lupin, "Why are the werewolves supporting Voldemort?" Lupin says because "they think that, under his rule, they will have a better life," and I just went, 'Oh, God damn it.' Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That is a truth of how political movements work.

Lorrie: Yes, and then Lupin just says it right out. "I cannot pretend that my particular brand of reasoned argument is making much headway against Greyback's insistence that we werewolves deserve blood, that we ought to revenge ourselves on normal people." Resentment [is] such an easy thing to exploit, and if you want to exploit it more, you create more unequal conditions to create more resentment. This is, in a nutshell, the biggest challenge to the tenuous moral of this series that love is more powerful than hate. It's like, 'Okay, really? All right, if you say so...'

JC: Yeah, I have not seen that much evidence, certainly not on a societal scale. Hate seems a lot more powerful than love on a societal scale. On a small person-to-person scale, I think that when people face each other, they tend to not be as awful as they are in mobs.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: But the ease with which anybody could just master this formula of creating inequality, then resentment and then exploitation of that resentment... The way that's just hanging low on the tree for anyone to pick...

JC: Yeah. Yeah, and how obvious it is when you see it and how hard... It's complex. Yeah, yeah. We joke about, "Why would people vote for the leopards eating people's faces party?" but it's like, "Well, this is why."

Lorrie: "Maybe your face will get eaten before mine, and I get to watch it before mine gets eaten, too."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Ugh... Yeah. This is quite a lot accomplished in one fireside chat, yeah? Then when Lupin mentions James... *gasps* Harry's been sitting on this all semester. "Lupin, do you know somebody called the Half-Blood Prince?"

JC: Yes. It's so interesting, too, because Lupin's reaction to this is so different from Hermione's, and part of it is that Hermione is seeing day-to-day that Harry is following the instructions in a book and we all know that's dangerous. Harry's says, "I think he invented the Levicorpus spell," and Lupin's like, "That was a fad my fifth year," which I think is really funny because as a grown-ass adult, when you see fads come back around, it's so fun to watch teenagers feel like they've invented a thing and it's like, "No, I knew who Lauryn Hill was a long time before you did. Yeah, no, that's been around for a while. It's not new." Lupin telling him that was funny. Yeah, I liked that.

Lorrie: Yeah. The reason Harry's asking is an obscure reason that is not obvious to everybody, and Lupin instantly identifies it, to Harry's embarrassment. Well, first Lupin teases him and he says, "Oh, why? Are you going to call yourself that?" Harry's like, "No, no, I wouldn't!" Lupin's laughing, but he knows instantly that Harry's saying that he wants to make up some connection to his dad. That is really not obvious to a lot of people, but this is more about the Harry/Lupin relationship that is unique in this series. Okay, Lupin would know that feeling of wanting some connection like that. Harry is genuinely embarrassed to have been caught out, and then Lupin says this super reasonable, helpful thing: "Well, check out how old the book is." 'Oh, yeah...'

JC: It's like, "Oh, okay, yeah, that I could have done," which is a great misdirection because it was a hand-me-down book to the actual Half-Blood Prince, so yeah.

Lorrie: Well, it does come in useful. It definitely does tell him more than he knew before. It's nearly fifty years old; well, it's not older than that. That's useful, so it wasn't Voldemort's book, for example. It was a little after 1945, after Grindelwald's defeat, a little after Voldemort left school. Okay, well, we know more now than we did before.

JC: I do find it interesting that Lupin does not seem particularly worried about this book that has Harry fascinated. No one is suspicious other than Hermione. Nah, it's just a book that someone wrote a bunch of stuff in. What could go wrong?

Lorrie: Oh, gosh... Also, Lupin and Harry are dealing with so many large-scale scary, awful things.

JC: This feels light in comparison.

Lorrie: Yeah. I had a major cringe moment when Ron opens his Christmas present from Lavender.

JC: Oh, wow. So yeah, they wake up... This is one of the details about this universe that I love, which is that you wake up on Christmas morning and any presents anyone has sent you appear at the foot of your bed. I'm like, 'What magic is this? Are there house-elves involved? I don't know how this works, but somehow presents get delivered.' It's Santa Claus, I don't know. Somehow, they magically get delivered; that's how Santa Claus works, too, but I just like that little bit of magic.

Lorrie: Yeah, and you don't have to worry about it. You just wake up... *gasps* Presents!

JC: Presents, yay!

Lorrie: Right.

JC: Oh, poor Ron. I love how this is kind of the beginning of the end of Ron and Lavender, though. The necklace -- just to remind readers who maybe haven't seen it for a while -- is this really thick gold chain, and there's the words... What is it?

Lorrie: "My Sweetheart."

JC: "My Sweetheart" hanging off of them, which sounds like the kind of thing you would win at a carnival by throwing darts at balloons.

Lorrie: It's very large.

JC: It would be on one of the things that you could choose. It feels a little bit like that. The idea that someone would intentionally purchase this... I love that one of the first things that Harry says is, basically, "I dare you to wear that in front of Fred and George," and Ron's like, "Oh, hell no!" But also, it's very clear to both Harry

and Ron that Lavender would not give him that if she knew him at all. First of all, no, don't give that to any sixteen-year-old boy.

Lorrie: First of all...

JC: No, never. Or anyone ever, except as a joke.

Lorrie: Maybe a dog.

JC: Yeah. Yeah, but the fact that she thinks that he likes this and would wear it really says a lot about the fact that they...

Lorrie: They are not on the same page.

JC: They don't really know each other at all, and then Ron admits that "we don't talk much." Yeah, we've all gotten that. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and at that age, she's never had a relationship like this before. How do you know what is and isn't normal? This is what she wants, and I can totally understand her feeling like the sexual intimacy is all part of an emotional intimacy and not being able to want one part of that without the other, but I remembered some things and I cringed.

JC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah...

Lorrie: It's funny, though.

JC: It is.

Lorrie: So they make it down to Christmas breakfast.

JC: But before they do, Harry gets this present from Kreacher, and it's so sweet that the first thing Harry thinks is, 'Oh, I forgot about Kreacher. Should I have gotten him a present?'

Lorrie: 'Am I supposed to?'

JC: He doesn't know. 'Should I have gotten him something?' and then it turns out to be a package full of maggots, which is like, 'Oh, thanks, Kreacher. Thanks!' That kind of answers that question, but it was just funny how it didn't even occur to Harry, 'Oh, wait, I have a house-elf that's technically someone in my family. Am I supposed to do that?'

Lorrie: 'Where's the handbook?' Yes.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Well, it was heartfelt. It was sincere.

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: This is a reminder of my friend Lokifan and her essay that in this series, Rowling writes romances as mysteries. They go down to Christmas breakfast and for some reason, Mrs. Weasley is glaring at Remus because Tonks is spending Christmas alone. What? Okay. That reminds Harry, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Hey, why did Tonks's Patronus change?" because of course, Lupin is the Patronus expert. "It's something big with four legs."

JC: You can see Lupin shrinking in his chair at this point. 'Oh, God, how do I answer this question?'

Lorrie: Yeah, and when he can't put it off any longer, he explains that sometimes "great shock" or "emotional upheaval" can change a Patronus. There's all of this going on -- Mrs. Weasley bears a grudge against Remus for this -- and even at nearly age seventeen, the kids are just completely unaware of all this adult stuff going on right over their heads.

JC: Yeah. I think Harry is thinking that this represents Sirius. He still thinks that, 'Oh, she misses Sirius. Her cousin died, and that's why she feels so terrible.' Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. This is the second time in this vacation that Harry has seen stuff going on with Lupin and thought, 'Maybe that has to do with something in my own story that's super important to me. Half-Blood Prince? Never mind who this really turns out to be. That's not my dad, is it? Because my dad is really important to me. Tonks's Patronus? Maybe that's Sirius. Maybe she misses Sirius really badly like we all do.'

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: It's good for Harry that he has Lupin there to even ask, and there's no point at which Lupin underestimates how important these questions are to Harry. Even though he can't be there for Harry because he's on these spy missions, it's not that he doesn't want to and it's not that he's not aware.

JC: Before we go on to the next visitors who arrive, when they first get to the table, the moment (it's weird and I don't really understand it) where Ginny, very cheerfully, goes, "Oh, Harry, you've got a maggot in your hair," and picks it out for him... Uh, what? 'Cheerfully'? I don't understand. Other than that Ginny is... We're being reminded of her existence and that she and Harry really still have this connection. She's not too squeamish to pick a maggot out of his hair, instantly recognizes it as a maggot, doesn't question, "Why would you have a maggot in your hair on Christmas morning?" There's just so much. I'm like, 'What's happening? What was that all about? I don't actually know.'

Lorrie: Well, the combination he feels of a shiver that has nothing to do with the maggot... it's this really weird, simultaneous gross-out factor that it's a maggot and arousal that Ginny's touching him. But combined with this gross-out factor, it's a very confusing package, right?

JC: Yeah, for sure.

Lorrie: It's like, 'Well, yeah, it's another one of those moments that could have been like a supercharged, hot romantic moment for the reader that's so not.'

JC: It's very not, yeah.

Lorrie: So not.

JC: But also again, Harry being awkward... He has a maggot in his hair...

Lorrie: Ew!

JC: And the girl he likes has to get it out of his hair for him. Oh, my God, and she's cheerful about doing it! Oh, wow, there's a lot going on there.

Lorrie: Oh, that was romantic... Yeah. It does encapsulate being a teenager and longing and longing for somebody, knowing that you're not attractive at all, at the moment.

JC: Oh, my gosh... It kind of parallels, to me... Was it fifth year on the train, when...

Lorrie: He's covered in Stinksap.

JC: Cho came along just as he was covered in Stinksap, yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and she's like, "Uh, I'll come back later." Gosh... So yeah, Harry Potter, Dashing Wizard Savior.

JC: Oh, yes.

Lorrie: Oh, that thing then happens where they've been not talking about Percy the whole time because obviously, his parents are upset that he's not there, and then they look out the window and there he is. He's coming... He has been pressed into service against his will by a higher-up to fake a reconciliation with his family. Oh, my God...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: How horrible is that?

JC: Yeah, yeah.

Lorrie: I actually felt bad for Percy here being so used. It's a little bit like Lupin going to be with the werewolves, right? It's not even like this is a neutral issue for me here. This is the worst issue of my life, and Mrs. Weasley crying and throwing her arms around him... Oh, ouch! Can you imagine Percy realizing what's being asked of him, and that there's nothing he can do about this and he's going to have to do it?

JC: Right.

Lorrie: Wow. I just imagine his shoulder muscles, that they just must have been turned to cement. Oh, gosh.

JC: Yeah. I think Harry sees it, and I'm sure everybody but Molly sees it. There's only one reason why Percy is there and he's being used by the Minister, but they're all being used by the Minister. Scrimgeour just wants to get to Harry, and this is the one time that he knew he could get in to talk to Harry without Dumbledore stopping him, and he uses the whole Weasley family to do it.

Lorrie: Oh, what a horrible work day for Percy.

JC: Ugh.

Lorrie: Merry Christmas!

JC: But also, I feel bad for all of them. Molly... this is her son that she's been missing and been teary about, and he's finally appeared. I don't know if she figures it out or what, but she's just so happy to see him. Everybody else in that room knows that it's under false pretenses. Ugh...

Lorrie: Yeah. I can also understand that even if she knows that he's being exploited and that he didn't want to be there, she just wanted to see him.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: If he can't push her off when she hugs him, she must miss him so much. Ugh... Thanks, Scrimgeour! Yuck, what a terrible situation. There is a scholar, Beatrice Groves; she is a Potter scholar, and one of her books is called *Literary Allusion in Harry Potter* and she does an excellent job of showing all the different tributes that Rowling put into this series, and this turn about the nondescript winter garden at the Burrow is a direct tribute to *Pride and Prejudice*...

JC: Oh...

Lorrie: Where there is, at the climactic turn of that book, this really horrible wealthy lady [who] comes and pays a very mean, overbearing visit to the heroine and insists on taking a turn about the garden, during which she is horrible. But the heroine actually wins that face-off, and that's exactly what Scrimgeour is doing here. That's the joke about "Oh, show me your charming garden," and it's just dead weeds under snow.

JC: With a garden gnome trying to pull a worm out of the ground.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Yeah. Oh, that's interesting.

Lorrie: Thrillingly, we get to see that Harry is completely mature enough to handle this.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Good for him.

JC: It's such a relief, because this is not his first rodeo with political machinations of people like this, and he's learned what to do and what not to do.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: The fact that he just lets Scrimgeour talk and he's like, 'I'm just not going to say anything...' Oh, my God. It's like that meme, the "shut the fuck up" meme. "When the cops are asking you questions, shut the fuck up." He's learned to shut the fuck up, and he employs that to great effect here.

Lorrie: Yeah. 'Let him flail.' I remember too that he learned a lot of this during the battle in the Ministry: the moment he realizes the Death Eaters want a prophecy and he has zero interest in this prophecy, suddenly he has negotiating power. 'All right, let the other person reveal what it is they want.' Even as he says to Scrimgeour, "Well, you're smarter than Fudge," he's not fazed; he knows. After he faced all of those Death Eaters trying to kill them, nope. "You want something, I don't want anything." Okay. He gets to learn from Scrimgeour that Dumbledore has actively blocked Scrimgeour from meeting Harry and using him. Okay, that's new information. Then Scrimgeour, who is not a people person...

JC: Scrimgeour's actually really clumsy in this entire interaction, which is very interesting. He's not a very good politician.

Lorrie: He did not ascend based on his people skills, no. He says this remarkably insensitive thing: "In any case, does it really matter whether you are 'the Chosen One' or not?" Oh, my goodness, that is a good line.

JC: Wow, yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. I like it as a piece of writing. Okay, that is super revealing about his character. It is not a standard line and you can see it. You can totally see a politician messing up like that, and then he realizes, 'Oh, I shouldn't have said that' and he goes, "Well, of course, to *you* it will matter enormously." Oh, God...

JC: "To the rest of us..."

Lorrie: "Yeah, well, does it matter if Stan Shunpike is really a Death Eater?" Well, of course, to Stan, it matters...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Scrimgeour tries to reason with Harry here. "To the Wizarding community at large... it's all perception, isn't it? It's what people believe that's important."

Disgusting as this is, it makes Harry's job so much easier. 'Oh, I'm just going to draw a boundary right there.' Yeah, it's, even though more sophisticated, not different at all from Cornelius Fudge trying to persuade Hagrid to see why it's so logical that Hagrid should go to Azkaban to cover for Fudge.

JC: Oh, my God.

Lorrie: I don't know why these people are trying to bother to convince people why they should want to sacrifice themselves for somebody else's agenda, but here he is trying to get Harry to see. Scrimgeour thinks he can get Harry on board with giving the public a boost by being a symbol of hope, which creates exactly the sort of puzzlement in Harry that you would think. Why on earth would he think that this is persuasive? Then he bribes Harry with a job as an Auror! Ugh, ugh, ugh...

JC: Yeah, and mentions Umbridge at the same time. What?! Then that tells us Umbridge is working. We knew -- well, I think we did know. No. No, we didn't know what happened to Umbridge at this point, did we? Did we know she was working in the Ministry again before now?

Lorrie: I think this is our first sign that her career has not ended.

JC: Yeah, right. She's still working in the Ministry.

Lorrie: Yep, still has a job.

JC: And after everything she did at Hogwarts, after everything she did to make Harry's life miserable -- and he shows Scrimgeour his hand with the scars on it -- that's like, 'Oh, wow, he brings up Umbridge.' That just shows how little he really knows about what's happening in his own Ministry. Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Yeah. Harry gets to use the example of Stan Shunpike as a clear example of why there's no reason for an individual to trust that the Ministry has any individual's interests at heart, which is an argument that Scrimgeour probably doesn't understand. But does it really matter what Scrimgeour understands?

JC: Whether he understands it or not, does it matter?

Lorrie: Yeah. Of course, to him... right. Scrimgeour recognizes his defeat and says, "You prefer -- like your hero, Dumbledore -- to disassociate yourself from the Ministry?" and Harry just says the simplest, purest thing: "I don't want to be used."

Oh, this struck me as quite real: "Some would say it's your duty to be used by the Ministry!" Oh, yeah, not very persuasive.

JC: That "some" is doing a lot of work there, right? What I always think about -- whenever I hear that phrase, 'Some say...' 'Some would say...' -- is that it was Fox News in the 90s that made that a thing in journalism. No one ever said that before Fox News, because then you don't have to cite your references, you don't have to name names, you don't have to give evidence. You're just literally citing rumor and it's being presented as fact, and Scrimgeour's doing that right there, so I hear that and I'm like, 'Fox News. Bad journalism.'

Lorrie: Well, as someone who was very briefly a full-time journalist, it's the oldest trick in the book. Fox News was new in that they took broadcast news, which had developed a really good reputation in that direction, but ever since broadsides were invented, ever since the printing press, ever since the gossip mill... the National Enquirer had this as their only M.O. (not that they were considered at that time to be a reliable news source), but this is also like, "Well, in my private mentions, everyone supports me."

JC: Oh, right, yeah. "The lurkers support me in chat." Yeah.

Lorrie: But it's also the call to patriotism. Humans are born with this desire to be good and faithful and patriotic and to do the right thing, and there are people who willingly go to war for the same administration that's cutting all veteran benefits and sending people abroad purely as cannon fodder because there's some desire to fulfill a duty, to appeal to this abstract patriotism that people have because they want to be good. That's just another element of human nature that is really easy to manipulate and I wish people wouldn't, but it's right there to be manipulated. Harry is an outlier in having had that completely burned out of him...

JC: True, for sure.

Lorrie: By long experience, by evidence. Scrimgeour says, "So you're not 'the Chosen One,'" and Harry gets the last laugh: "I thought you said it didn't matter either way," said Harry with a bitter laugh. "Not to you anyway." Bitter is the pure descriptor of Harry's position with all of this here. Scrimgeour, you're just a real latecomer to this situation that has created an extraordinarily bitter sixteen-year-old who has mountains of receipts. Yeah, there's no reconciling their two positions,

because Harry says, "I don't remember you rushing to my defense when I was trying to tell everyone Voldemort is back. The Ministry wasn't so keen to be pals last year." It's a face-off; it's an impasse. Scrimgeour's lost and says, "Where does Dumbledore go when he's not at Hogwarts?" "No idea."

JC: Yep.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Did he really think he was going to get an answer to that, after all of this?

Lorrie: No, he didn't. He has lost this face-off so much that he has nothing to lose by just saying it, and he was curious. 'Well, does this kid know? Has Dumbledore confided in this kid?' No. Yeah, then we get one of the foundational lines of this series: "Dumbledore's man through and through, aren't you, Potter?" Harry says yes, he is and he just walks away.

JC: Yeah. I love that it's meant as an insult, and Harry completely claims it at that point and says, "Yeah. Put it on a t-shirt. Let's go!"

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah, and Scrimgeour's trying to make it out that Dumbledore has hoodwinked Harry into this, but no. Harry says, "Believe whatever you want. I don't care," basically. When my friend Irvin Khaytman first published his book on Dumbledore, part of his publicity campaign for it was he got two buttons printed up; one of them said "The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore" with the word 'lies' really big, and the other button said "Dumbledore's man through and through," and his campaign was that when you came to get one of his books and to get them signed, you could pick which button you wanted. At one of his publicity stops, I was there with him, and as my gift to him I got a third button printed up that said "Eh, Dumbledore did his best" and that one was popular also. But yeah, Irvin does define himself as Dumbledore's man through and through. I think I actually get there, too, via "Dumbledore did his best." Huh... What about you?

JC: Yeah, I think I totally agree with that. One of the things I genuinely like about the series -- and I have to say I've not read Irvin's book, so I don't know anything about what he wrote there: Dumbledore is very human throughout the series and he makes mistakes like humans. The correspondingly huger thing, right? He makes mistakes. He's very powerful. He mostly uses that power for good, but not always.

He's just very human. He's not a god-like creature. He's not even like Gandalf; he's not Merlin. He's very human and I like that about him, and I like that as the series goes on -- particularly in Book Seven -- we start to learn a lot more about his backstory that we didn't know before and it humanizes him even more. I think that yeah, like any human, he did his best. He really did try and he made mistakes along the way, and if he could do it again, he would do things differently, but I think that captures it. Eh, he did his best.

Lorrie: He did better than I could imagine anyone else doing, but he has limitations because we all do. Yeah, no matter what doubts and resentments Harry might have against Dumbledore, having Scrimgeour's visit really puts it all in perspective. Okay, Dumbledore might turn out to be wrong about Snape, but you know what? I'm going to gamble on that, because look at the alternative.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. That is really true, that Harry is presented with a choice at the end of this chapter and it's like, 'These are your choices. What are you going to do? Are you going to trust Dumbledore (even though you really don't like Snape), or are you going to not trust Dumbledore?' Yeah. Like Lupin says earlier, "You either trust him or you don't," and then the consequences from that trust follow.

Lorrie: Yeah. Meanwhile, there's poor Percy as a living example of how it feels to agree to Scrimgeour's agenda.

JC: Yes. Yeah.

Lorrie: Percy... Not a whole lot going for him, but boy, he didn't deserve that either.

JC: That's true. Lupin, also, is an example of what it means to trust Dumbledore and put your faith in Dumbledore. It's not all sunshine and sparkles either.

Lorrie: Yeah. Lupin is viciously bitter when he says, "Look how convenient for Dumbledore that I was a spy ready-made." He's not going to be mature about this. This espionage post triggers him constantly. Nobody wants that, but what are you going to do? Is it necessary? Yeah. Can anyone else do it? No, probably not. Yuck! Well, Lupin, you were already having such a good life, right? Fascinating! I'm glad these people all got to see each other over Christmas break, even with all these

horrible tensions, because the tensions are happening whether or not they get to see each other.

JC: True.

Lorrie: Oof.

JC: It's also interesting, too, because the Christmas break -- I keep wanting to call it winter break because that's what we call it here -- is one where the kids are off-campus. They're not at Hogwarts. Hogwarts provides this shield against the outside world for the most part, and when they leave, that's when shit goes down. Being at the Burrow -- which is also a very safe place -- the world can still come in and find them, so this is one of the moments when we see a little bit of what's really going on out there.

Lorrie: Yeah, and we see how these almost-of-age wizards are moving into their place in the resistance and really proving themselves well. As worried as every single person was when Scrimgeour asked to see Harry alone, when Harry said, "No, I got this," they didn't stop him.

JC: Right. That's true.

Lorrie: Harry was quite right. He did have it.

JC: Oh, there's one more thing. There's one person missing from this chapter, who was Hermione, and knowing what is coming, I am so grateful that Hermione got one more Christmas to spend with her parents.

Lorrie: Ouch.

JC: Ugh. This is it for her, because at the end of this school year, Hermione disappears from her parents' life and sends them off to Australia.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Yeah, so I'm glad that even though she's not there, it's really good that she's not because she's getting to spend one more holiday with them.

Lorrie: And however much she sees that she loves them is going to harden her resolve that she's going to have to protect them by non-consensually going into their minds. She's really having a rotten year.

JC: Yeah, this is true.

Lorrie: She's not coming home all happy either.

JC: Right, yeah.

Lorrie: But she gets to finish off some business with her family. I'm sorry, that was actually a really negative take on your take, which had a lot of positivity to it.

JC: No, but they're both true. They can both be true at the same time. I think that that's what love around families is like. There are good things, and then there are... Yeah, yeah. I think both things can be true.

Lorrie: Well, I hope that they're very, very proud of their amazing daughter.

JC: For the time that they have left to remember. That whole thing is so tragic. When we get to that in book seven, I'm going to be so sad. It's just so sad.

Lorrie: I'm headcanoning. I have a headcanon because she's now of age by Wizarding standards. Hermione is seventeen. I have a headcanon that this visit home over Christmas to her parents, they'll feel some satisfaction. "Look, she's a woman. We were able to find a place for her where she was able to reach her potential. She is doing powerful magic, she's lovely, she's kind." Maybe I hope that they can feel like, "Oh, okay, we did it. We got her to be of age," and maybe they'll carry that sense of completion even into their mind-wiped future existence, I hope. I hope.

JC: I think that's the great tragedy of Hermione, though. I don't think she ever sees her parents again.

Lorrie: No, she does.

JC: She does?

Lorrie: Extracanonically, it's interview canon -- secondary canon -- that Rowling said, "No, she does eventually go back to Australia, retrieve them, and restore their memories."

JC: Oh, that makes me feel better, though what a mind fuck for them.

Lorrie: Right. Yeah.

JC: "Okay, so there was a war and I was one of the people fighting on the front line of it, and in order to protect you..." Yeah, wow, "I had to make you forget I existed for five years or whatever without telling you." Yeah.

Lorrie: Yep, and how frightened one would be of one's own child. "You could just do that to me? Wow."

JC: Yeah. It would never be the same again, for sure.

Lorrie: No, it would not.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: So yeah, all of these people in this chapter doing incredibly difficult things... The next chapter is called A Sluggish Memory.

JC: Ooh!

Lorrie: Yeah, I love this chapter. I'm very much looking forward to it.

JC: Okay, okay. I don't remember... I know that there's this big plot in the spring semester of Harry trying to get this memory from Slughorn, but I guess it starts here?

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: We will find out. Okay!

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