

Transcript

Episode 6.2

Book 6, Chapter 2: Spinner's End

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 Two: Spinner's End.

Lorrie: Spinner's End. Narcissa and Bellatrix call on Snape (and Wormtail) at Snape's Muggle home. That's it. That's my summary.

JC: That's it. That's the summary. Yeah... Yeah, wow. It was so interesting to come back and read this chapter again after all this time, knowing how things turn out. I know that the first time I read this, I didn't know what they were talking about ("What is the task that the Dark Lord has set Draco?"), and I haven't reread this chapter. I only read this book once, so it was really fun to read that again. Also, there were so many little details in this that stood out to me that I think I didn't get the first time I read it, so yeah, there's a lot of really interesting stuff in here.

Lorrie: Yeah. It's impossible to get it the first time you read it, and even if you read it several times (but before the seventh book comes out), there's still a lot of stuff that you cannot possibly understand. It's really designed for multiple reads. Yeah, I remember the first time I read this chapter, I turned to my husband and said, "Snape just got even more interesting." By the end of this chapter, my mind is

totally blown. 'What?!' What a way for chapter two of a long novel to set the stakes really high... Whatever is going to happen by the end of this novel, we're going to be emotionally wrung out. There's no way this can be a casual read here. Okay.

JC: Also (and I may be wrong about this; I'm trying to remember about the other book), is this the first time that we've had a chapter like this where it's not Harry's POV?

Lorrie: At the beginning of *Goblet of Fire*, we get that mid-century British, post-war realistic novel about small town village life.

JC: Ah, that's right, yeah. Okay, so we do see that there. That's true. But yeah, I remember when I read this book, it stood out to me that we had this whole chapter that featured Snape. 'Wow, what's happening here?'

Lorrie: And this comes after the Prime Minister's chapter.

JC: So we haven't seen Harry yet, which is wild.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: We talked about him, but we haven't seen him yet, which is really interesting, too.

Lorrie: If you think about the centers of power in this universe... On the one end of the spectrum, you have the super public centers of power, which is the two Prime Ministers; then -- this is the absolute opposite end of the spectrum -- this is the secret center of power. This is the fulcrum of both Dumbledore's and Voldemort's operations, this home. Yeah, completely secret.

JC: I like the contrast of the first chapter, we were in the Prime Minister's mansion on Downing Street; then we go to the very opposite of that scene-wise. We're in this working-class town -- I don't even know where we are in England -- there's dirty riverbanks with trash, there's abandoned factories with these chimneys rising up and dominating the landscape. Knowing when this was set, too (this was set in the mid-late 90s)... The first time I ever went to London was in 1993. I was a young college student, and I'd had these visions of London; I don't know, I was so shocked by how grimy it was at the time. It was like the first time I went to New York; I was like, 'What the hell?! This place is disgusting!'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: London was a lot like that, but I remember riding a train in from the airport -- even flying in and just seeing that everything looked gray and dingy -- and at that time it was still a lot of coal dust in the air, so when I would blow my nose, it would be black. I just remember thinking, 'People live like this?!'

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: It just makes me think about this kind of environment that seems really depressing and all, and that's where Snape grew up. That's how he grew up.

Lorrie: Abandoned mill town, yeah.

JC: Yeah. Wow. The contrast...

Lorrie: The language in this whole chapter is heavily allegorical, because we have the dark sister and the fair sister. We have the ominous black water, the chimney is ominous, the sisters are running between patches of light and deep darkness, the wine is blood-red wine... With this kind of writing, the chapter is telling us that characters are about to make choices that are going to shape their destinies. That's the feeling. And then oh, I love the name Spinner's End, which is so supremely evocative. For one thing, Spinner's End is the mill town that used to be there, but also the Fates are spinning. The whole concept of spinning being a feminine domain, that this is the distaff side... When you finish reading *Half-Blood Prince* and then you place it in the seven-book series, then the whole theme of *Half-Blood Prince* is the hidden mother's story and how you don't understand what's happening if you allow the mother's story to remain hidden, but that is hinted at here with the distaff side, Spinner's End. It's also the center of the spider-web, because Snape does get characterized somewhat as a spider and him being at the center of all the operations. The meaning that settles with me the most is that 'spinner' is the male version of 'spinster.' He's almost middle-aged at this point and he's very obviously single (not taken) and lonely (seriously lonely); there's no explanation, but he clearly lives alone in this house.

JC: And not counting Wormtail, which we don't.

Lorrie: No. He clearly never had siblings. His parents have gone the way of all parents of his generation in *Harry Potter*: they just all conveniently died.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: He's alone. Oh, and then -- oh, my gosh -- the way that this chapter slowly introduces these sisters, Cissy and Bella, and you realize, 'Oh, my gosh, this is Narcissa and Bellatrix!'

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: We've met them as this self-absorbed, haughty society wife and this belligerent criminal. No, here they're just sisters and they call each other Cissy and Bella, and they have a dynamic that we recognize: they have affection, they have bonds, they have shared history... Yeah. Bellatrix has her contempt for the poverty that she sees all around here; Narcissa, who normally would also, has completely changed. She's on a mission: she wants help from Snape for who he is. Status no longer matters to her at all. None of the dirt that they're running through is even bothering her. Can you imagine? I did kind of feel a pang for Narcissa. Imagine what a desperate mission this is and how secret it is and has to be, and your goddamn sister finds out and is tagging along, and the whole time she's like, "Don't do it, don't do it." UGH!

JC: Yeah, yeah. UGH!

Lorrie: But also truly, Narcissa is on such a mission she is not letting anything stop her. You would think that you couldn't stop Bellatrix from doing anything, but no, this is something where not even Bellatrix can control this.

JC: Yeah, yeah.

Lorrie: So nosy. Then there's also (surprisingly, touchingly) Bellatrix's motives... They're not even selfish. She's not actually chasing down Narcissa out of evil; she's just worried. First, she's worried that Narcissa is putting herself in danger. She's saying, "No, you can't go to Snape. You can't trust him." She's worried what'll happen to Narcissa, and then Narcissa says, "The Dark Lord trusts him." Then Bellatrix is also worried for Voldemort.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: She's looking around, saying, "The Dark Lord is, I believe, mistaken." She knows she can't get through to Voldemort, but he doesn't know what kind of... "We have to protect him."

JC: Okay. I remember when I read this the first time, that was my first indication of 'Oh, the Death Eaters talk about Snape behind his back, and they don't trust him and they don't understand.' Snape's getting it on both ends.

Lorrie: Oh, yeah.

JC: Yeah. That's like, 'Oh, my God!' Harry and friends are like, "Well, Dumbledore trusts him, Voldemort trusts him." Whoa, that's interesting. That part I find really interesting, but also, this is bringing up weird Marjorie Taylor Green and Trump things for me.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JC: Just starting to speak, "I think that maybe he's wrong about this."

Lorrie: "Sssshhh!"

JC: Exactly.

Lorrie: "If anyone heard..." Yeah.

JC: Yeah, yeah. As of the time of recording this, Marjorie Taylor Green (literally this morning or overnight) resigned from the House of Representatives citing disagreements with Trump.

Lorrie: Who knows where that's going to go... Yeah.

JC: Who knows where that's going to go, but that's just in my head. It was in my head even when I read this a couple days ago, and now it's even more in my head. But yeah, I see that there's little cracks in 'What's the Dark Lord doing? Why is he doing this? Why is he trusting this guy? We're not sure if we think that he's got the right idea here.'

Lorrie: Yeah, and they're not allowed to think that Voldemort is ever wrong about anything.

JC: Yep, yep.

Lorrie: If they're trying to protect him from himself, they have to do it without letting him know that's what they're doing. This is the dynamic of serving a tyrant.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: You have to coddle them, and it's infantilizing.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And then second to that, Bellatrix says, "In any case, we were told not to speak of the plan to anyone. This is a betrayal of the Dark Lord --" 'Oh, yeah, plus we're being bad Death Eaters, or I'm being a bad Death Eater.' Narcissa is so done and she threatens Bellatrix, who is at this point still beautifully innocent and naive and thinks that sisterly bonds still mean something. That's obviously never been challenged before. Bellatrix laughs and then gets her innocence ruined forever when Narcissa actually attacks her; this is a separation. Bellatrix doesn't have children. She doesn't know that this is something that's going to take Narcissa away from even her. Something is separating the two of them now. Huh...

JC: Yeah, and right before that, Narcissa says that she's desperate. There's nothing that she wouldn't do anymore.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And that's something that Bellatrix, yeah, doesn't really understand.

Lorrie: Yeah, and then that makes Narcissa join a small group of characters in this series that reach that point. Obviously, Lily Potter was there. "No, this is my baby. Take me!" We'll see later that Dumbledore was there, saying, "Please don't do that. I'll do anything," and we'll see later, still, that Snape gets there. This is always about protecting somebody that means more to you than your own life.

JC: Yeah. Can we go back and talk about the fox?

Lorrie: Oh, yeah. That poor fox...

JC: Who briefly gets his own POV. What it reminded me of was that bit in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* where the whale is spontaneously created in the sky and it starts plummeting to Earth, and it has this whole experience of consciousness (almost like a Descartes-ian kind of experience of, "I think, therefore I am") and then it splats on the ground just as it starts to make sense of the world around it. The fox reminded me of that, except obviously, this was a lot more cruel in that Bellatrix just kills first and then goes, "Oh, it was just a fox," the way that people would step on a bug.

Lorrie: The worthlessness, in her opinion.

JC: Yeah. There's nothing. "That life had no value to me," and I thought it was interesting that it was a fox because there's all this history of the way foxes have been mistreated. Lots of cultures think of foxes as vermin and don't like them, so it's just very interesting to think about the casual cruelty of that moment and that fox's little one-paragraph POV.

Lorrie: Well, what hurts is the fox is skinny and is trying to eat something, and it's a crisp packet; it's crap, it's junk. That's just the worthlessness of people who live in a place like Spinner's End, where people don't respect their lives and their needs and think that it's easy to dismiss them, because clearly that's how Bellatrix is sneering when she looks around and can't believe that Snape has to live here. Eww...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yuck. Man, the house, the way that the house is described at Spinner's End... Even though I have never been inside one, I just knew this house must feel so deeply familiar to British readers who know this kind of setup: a small working-class house that's set out a certain way (the tiny sitting room and the stairs) emphasized to me why it was hard for Rowling to be the screenwriter for *Fantastic Beasts* (the series) set in other cultures, because this kind of deep, deep familiarity with a whole culture (and the mythology that you can build up around that) can't be replicated. She takes us into something that just feels bone familiar to me, even though I haven't lived there, but the way that the furniture hasn't been updated since Snape was a kid...

JC: Yeah. That's not important, and it looks like a padded cell in a way that the walls are covered with books. Even the door that goes upstairs has a bookshelf on it.

Lorrie: Love it. Love it.

JC: That just says a lot about who this person is. He's inherited this house from his parents; he doesn't live there, except, I guess, during school breaks, but it's still him.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's a place of refuge. He's not a materialistic person at all, so you think, 'Okay, why wouldn't he just sell that house and buy another house somewhere else that has better memories?' That's not important to him.

Lorrie: Not that important to him.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Well, the books remind me of something I've mentioned before: David Martin, the Hufflepuff (David the Hufflepuff), saying that that's a clue in this series, when there are people who read and revere books, always turn out to be good characters. In this author's universes, you cannot be evil if you revere books.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And we cannot tell: whose books are these? Where did they come from? Did they belong to one or both of Snape's parents? Did Snape buy them later with his teaching salary? Are they Muggle books? Are they magical books? We don't know. The books themselves are old and bound in leather, but they are covering that nothing matters to him in his living space except the books and places to sit while he reads them.

JC: Yeah, like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. He's like the anti-Belle, but still... yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. A stub of candle to read by. He's off the grid, being a wizard.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: This is, yeah, as you said, unmaterialistic. The most unmaterialistic of characters, he doesn't even care about magical objects. There's a way in which "a threadbare sofa, an old armchair," and books and books and books is idyllic.

JC: Yeah. Even though this place is not described as creepy, which is interesting to me. It feels cozy. Dingy, but cozy...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And that is not a set of words I would have associated with Snape, probably, on a first read...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But yeah, it's like, 'Okay, yeah, no. That's right.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: You also cannot tell, from this description of the house, whether he cares more about Potions or Defense Against the Dark Arts. This is his home, and the fact that he lives in this very unappealing place that nobody is going to want to seek out -- he's really hard to find -- actually is a plus for him.

JC: Right. The neighbors aren't going to come knocking.

Lorrie: No. Nobody's going to be calling.

JC: They're like, "Oh, it's that creepy kid that the Snapes died and left their little shitty house to." Yeah.

Lorrie: No. No one's asking questions...

JC: Right.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. I want to go back to your point about books, because I think that is a really interesting point that if a character loves books and surrounds themselves with books, that's a sign that they're a good person. I love how that connects to if you're a person who bans those books or wants to restrict people's access to books, then you are an evil person. I think that that idea... I see it here now, and I also see how it plays into this fundamental... What's the word? Not 'moral,' but this fundamental idea in our society that books and knowledge and pursuing knowledge... that's a good characteristic.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. Well, that's really interesting. I like that.

Lorrie: Yeah, and it's not about whether the books are good or evil; you're supposed to be able to decide that on your own.

JC: Yes. Yes.

Lorrie: Knowledge is knowledge.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: The thing that I find most thrilling about the layout of this house is that the bookshelves are secret passageways.

JC: Yeah. Isn't that the fantasy...

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Where every person who loves books is to have this room like this, where you can close out the outside world and you have a secret library? Oh, man... Goals.

Lorrie: Yeah. This is the narrow staircase that goes up to his bedroom that's behind that, but the way that this is a complete metaphor for how he must have grown up (because he was growing up in this household that we knew had domestic turbulence) -- this is a beautiful way of saying succinctly that reading was child Snape's escape. This is where he went to hide; this is how his imagination took him away someplace safe where he couldn't be found and followed.

JC: Just like Matilda.

Lorrie: Oh, God...

JC: I'm just connecting it to all these children's stories suddenly. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's what it feels like.

Lorrie: And this is part of the formation of the enormously strong *Harry Potter* fandom: a lot of kids who were slightly weird and readers formed a powerful attachment to this series. This is a pure version of that, and if you hear people talking about their Potter stories -- how they first bonded with this series when they were children -- this is exactly the service that this series is providing. Here's a secret bookshelf that takes you from the world that we all see into someplace where your imagination can take you away. The secret passageway is also his eavesdropping spot. This kid, who from childhood wanted to be (and then became) a spy from a protected secret place has to defend himself; he has to know what's going on. Yeah, the fact that this is where he grew up... Nobody can deceive Snape in this house. He knows this house so thoroughly.

JC: I love that the door opens and there's just the description of the hair and the nose, and it's like, 'Oh, we know who this is. You didn't have to say the name.' Yeah.

Lorrie: The "curtains of hair," because he's always been described as curtains of hair, but now the word 'curtains' plays the role of emphasizing the secrecy, the several ways in this chapter that the characters are looking around to make sure that they're not being overheard. Yeah, he opens the door a little bit and just sticks out his nose.

JC: Yeah. I love it. When he says, "What a pleasant surprise!" The way it's written with an exclamation point...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I cannot hear that in Snape's voice, because it's written as if it's "What a pleasant surprise!" I cannot hear that. I kind of can hear Alan Rickman going, "What a pleasant surprise..." but it's written -- I can't tell how we're supposed to read that. I find that really challenging.

Lorrie: Right?

JC: Is it sarcastic? Is it genuine? Is it fake-sounding? I don't know.

Lorrie: Well, from the point of view of Snape -- who never gets a knock on the door, and then you open it and you see desperate-looking Narcissa -- Snape (we find out as this chapter goes on) knows exactly what's been happening in the Malfoy family life, so there's really only one reason why this would be happening. He sees that and then the comically glowering sister behind her... I imagine that there's got to be some amusement in that voice. I imagine the "pleasant surprise" part is he does definitely want to get across to Narcissa that yes, she is welcome -- he is, in fact, glad to see her; "Come on in" -- but see...

JC: Interesting. Also, when they walk in, the way that Snape and Bellatrix state each other's names in greeting... That feels really old-fashioned to me. I can't imagine modern people saying that, but it's like, 'I'm acknowledging that you're here, and that's all I'm going to say.' They do that to each other and it's respectful, but with disrespect in brackets after it and it's so interesting. "Snape." "Bellatrix."

Lorrie: It kind of made me think about fencing or any sort of duel, or like in *Hamilton*, "Your obedient servant, A. Ham., A. Burr."

JC: Yeah. Yeah, there you go. "With all due respect..."

Lorrie: Yes. Oh, that actually reminds me... I think about this very frequently: during the first Trump presidency, when I was watching some hearings and Adam Schiff, some Republican Congressperson said really disgusting, awful things about Adam Schiff. Schiff came up to reply and said what he usually says, which is, "I thank the gentleman for his kind remarks," but it had been so awful that he just said it laughing the whole time and everyone laughed.

JC: Yeah. What else could you say to that? Well, that showed that it didn't get to you. "All right."

Lorrie: "Well, back to --"

JC: It's noted. "We'll make a note of it," or whatever. Yeah.

Lorrie: And then we saw in the previous chapter how Scrimgeour dominated the other characters in that scene; we get that from Snape here when Narcissa says, "Are we alone?" How very much more insulting it is for Snape to say, "Oh, yeah... oh, except for vermin." That is a way of saying, "No, Wormtail is here."

JC: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so I think we probably will find out later, but why is Wormtail there?

Lorrie: Ah, excellent! Yes. This took me a while to figure out, because there's no reason why he has to be.

JC: Yeah. One of the things that you get from this chapter is that Wormtail is either there looking for something that you can take back to Voldemort about Snape -- that's one feeling I get -- or that Wormtail literally has nowhere else to go and Snape was the only one who said, "I have a spare room." Or maybe Wormtail is there on Voldemort's orders, I don't know. I have theories, but I have no clue.

Lorrie: Well, we see here that ostensibly, Voldemort put him there because when Snape orders drinks and Wormtail objects, Snape says, "I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me." Wormtail is completely stung and said, "Yeah, assist you, not clean your house." That brings up, 'Assist Snape with

what?' What?! If you were Snape, what would you possibly entrust to this horrible, incompetent person that you don't respect? Snape, who is self-sufficient about everything... It looks to me more like Voldemort has better lackeys now. If you remember in *Goblet of Fire* when Voldemort was in infant form, he completely depended on Wormtail to bottle feed him, but he was insulting Wormtail the whole time anyway.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Now, he's finally rid of him. This also helps out Voldemort ("Okay, then Wormtail can keep an eye on Snape") and Voldemort can use the natural tension that arises when you run things tyrannically (where all of your lackeys are trying to compete with each other and insecure), but mostly I think he's just happy to be rid of Wormtail. It's just a win-win for Voldemort, and I'm sure Snape does not see it as a gift to him, no matter how it's wrapped.

JC: Lord. Whatever the relationship between the two of them is... Wormtail was in the gang of kids that bullied and tormented him; now, he has to put up with this sniveling guy in his house. Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Unlike two of them, he didn't even have the power to pull off the bullying, and unlike Lupin, he wasn't even not an idiot entirely. There's just zero to respect. This is an example, I think, of how this is the one character where every single person is united in having an opinion about him, the author and all characters on every side.

JC: That's true. Nobody likes Wormtail.

Lorrie: They just loathe and despise him. The contempt is palpable. Even Umbridge has colleagues who enjoy her; Percy Weasley, for a while, thinks that she's a very delightful woman. Wormtail... it's unanimous. The author is disgusted by him so greatly that she makes it unanimous. We find out by the tiniest of hints laid in this volume what the author was doing by placing this character in this chapter, because when Harry finds out at the end of this book who sent Voldemort after his parents to kill them, then Harry has a thought to himself: It was Snape and Wormtail together who had sent Voldemort after Lily and James. That's what's happening here, I believe: this is the setup for a second chance. There was a time

when there was a mother desperate to protect her son, and this mother even had a horrible older sister...

JC: True.

Lorrie: And Voldemort was going to kill the son.

JC: Who was obsessed with a horrible boy.

Lorrie: So what are they going to do about this? Are they going to protect the child? Are they going to honor the mother or not? Back when it was Harry, both Snape and Wormtail gave up the parents and did not protect the child. We will find out much later that Snape, at this point, is living out the second chance that he's been given; he is back in this situation. Voldemort ran an experiment with Harry where he didn't understand the protection of a mother's love, what happens. What just happened when he tried to kill a baby and then the mother's love -- something or other, some magic that Voldemort doesn't understand... He is reproducing that experiment now, but part of the insult the first time was that Lily Potter was a Mudblood. "Ew. How could...?" Not only did she and the baby defeat Voldemort, but she wasn't even somebody you respect. 'Well, let's try this again with a pure-blood.' You have the same setup and Voldemort is going to run the experiment again and observe, and Snape is on his second chance and is going to make a different choice this time. Wormtail was also there, has no remorse, has no interest in a second chance... He hasn't changed at all. He's not going to do anything differently this time. I thought, 'Okay, that's the contrast that we're seeing between the two of them.' Neither of them was a pleasant person the first time around; neither of them is somebody that you want to spend a lot of time with now, either, but one of them is trying this over again in a different way and has learned. Also, there's no comment on how this guy's name is now entirely Wormtail. That used to be what the Marauders called him, because that was his shape-shifting form.

JC: Yeah. No one called him Pettigrew.

Lorrie: No, no.

JC: They just call him Wormtail. Yeah, you're right about that. Everyone calls him Wormtail.

Lorrie: They've all just agreed.

JC: Voldemort called him Wormtail.

Lorrie: Yes, he does.

JC: Is that how Wormtail introduced himself to Voldemort in the first place?

Lorrie: No.

JC: Wow, what the hell? Where did this come from?

Lorrie: No, they just all decided that that's his true self.

JC: That's his true self. Wow.

Lorrie: Yeah. Here's the one character that the author just can't make anybody respect: the one named after her father, Peter Rowling. So yeah, there he is sniveling away, and Snape orders him to get the elf-made wine, which is in a dusty bottle. Clearly, this had at one point been a gift that Snape never bothered to touch. Bellatrix is there glowering at him, which Snape thinks is hilarious.

JC: She's not even sitting down; she's standing behind Narcissa. Yeah.

Lorrie: Wormtail leaves, and of course Snape doesn't even have to test for it; just points his wand at the hidden staircase door and BANG! routs Wormtail from that hiding place.

JC: Yeah. You hear a yelp, and then a fumbling up the stairs. That's so funny, but also it does beg this is his home and nobody's going to get the best of him here. Also, it's such a power move to go, 'Yeah, no. I know. I know he's there listening. No.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and then after that, none of the three (of the others) has the slightest worry about Wormtail.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: They know for sure that no, Snape's taken care of it. Oh, Narcissa... Once they get rid of Wormtail, Narcissa knows she's breaking rules; she's so desperate and she says, "I think you're the only one who can help me."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Snape won't let her go on at first, because Bellatrix is there bursting and Snape is really ready to spar with Bellatrix.

JC: Yeah. I get the impression that he's been ready. He knows that the Death Eaters have been talking shit behind his back, and he is ready to lay it to rest. He's got his arguments ready, he lays them out... He is so ready for this.

Lorrie: Yeah. He's not afraid of her in the least, which carries through this whole scene. He's so unafraid that he finds this whole thing funny, and watching her splutter is payday for him.

JC: Right, yeah. He knows that this is not his intellectual equal.

Lorrie: Oh, boy...

JC: He's like, 'Yeah, bring it. Let's go.'

Lorrie: Yeah. At first, I thought, 'Oh, he's prepared,' and then I thought, 'Oh, no, no, no, he's overprepared.' This is probably such a relief to him. Finally!

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Finally, he gets to use some of this. Oh... Anyway, as a reader, this is certainly satisfying.

JC: It really is, and I have to say I went into this book... I know that when I read it for the first time, I was a person who trusted Snape. I was like, 'Okay, Dumbledore trusts Snape, I trust Snape,' so I was already convinced that he was on the side of good. I remember enjoying reading this very much, and it was even more enjoyable the second time around. But yeah, I remember at this point, I did not have any doubts about Snape's allegiances, so I loved watching him take Bellatrix apart here.

Lorrie: Yeah. This is totally one of those scenes where Harry watches like, 'Oh-ho-ho, can't wait to see this happen!'

JC: Yeah, yeah. It's like, 'Where's my popcorn?'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: 'Snape's going to take on Bellatrix! Where's my popcorn? I need it!'

Lorrie: 'Oh, this is going to be good.'

JC: And he just lets her start. He's like, "All right, illuminate me. What are your reasons?" She spews them all out, and he's like, "Okay, let's start at the beginning, shall we?"

Lorrie: How yummy!

JC: It's so great.

Lorrie: Yes, and the way he puts her down: "It will save tedious interruptions."

JC: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Lorrie: What I am so impressed by is what a fantastic and expert way this is for the author to do an info dump.

JC: Ooh, that is really true. I hadn't thought about it that way, but you're right.

Lorrie: She is summarizing the long game that she has been building up with this character. That's the purpose of Bellatrix spewing all of these questions, and in so doing, she's introducing that this is going to be the big mystery that defines the last two books of the series. She does it so well -- with so much character growth and so much delightful dialogue and amusement and satisfaction -- that we forget, 'Oh, she's just doing an info dump.'

JC: Yeah, that's true. It is.

Lorrie: So good, so good! I'm so impressed.

JC: I think I'm also impressed by the fact that no matter where you think Snape's allegiances lie, it works; the whole scene works, and who doesn't root for Snape here? Even if you hate him, you're rooting for him here. I feel like that's an incredible achievement.

Lorrie: Yes, it is.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and it's not even if you think Bellatrix is evil; it's her helpless smarminess about this all. Also, the unfairness of this... Bellatrix is completely correct.

JC: That's what's amazing, yeah, about it. Right.

Lorrie: She can't prove anything, and she knows that all this stuff he's coming up with is like, "But -- but -- but..." Actually, Snape was on the other end of this at the end of *Prisoner of Azkaban* when he's running around screaming, "I know Harry Potter! I know he helped Sirius Black escape!" and everyone's staring at him, but no. He can't prove a darn thing; he's completely correct. Ugh... But no, Bellatrix is right not to trust Snape, even though Voldemort trusts him, so yeah. Again, Voldemort... that's what happens when you have a cult leader and you are trapped because you're not allowed to acknowledge that the cult leader might have vulnerabilities. Acknowledging this is treachery, so if you care about them... Oh, gosh, how are you going to protect them from themselves? Snape, that's where he starts out: by exploiting that conundrum for her. He's got her there.

JC: I love that she asks a number of questions, and his response is basically, "Do you think you're smarter than Voldemort? Do you think that you're asking questions that he doesn't already know the answer to? Do you really think that?" I love that. It's hilariously --

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Because yeah, she is right, but he exploits her loyalty to the Dark Lord there. It's great.

Lorrie: Yeah. Her brain is going to short-circuit if he continues this way. Then we get evidence. This is the confirmation in the series that Snape never had a big dream to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. He never thought teaching was his calling at all, which solves that mystery: 'Why is this miserable human being even teaching? Is there some misguided fantasy he had?' No, no, no, no. "I was where he ordered me to be, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because he wished me to spy upon Albus Dumbledore. You know, I presume, that it was on the Dark Lord's orders that I took up the post." Okay, that answers that: Snape's true calling is to be a spy. That's been his job all along; teaching is his espionage post. He does not particularly care whether he teaches Defense or Potions or whatever.

Miraculously, he's so smart that whatever job was open he could teach, but no, he's a spy. He's not a teacher, although that doesn't stop him from caring. That terrible position of despising his students and yet caring so much that he covers their scrolls with writing. "No, you morons, no! Have I taught you nothing?!"

JC: And protecting the ones who would love to become junior Death Eaters...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Try to keep them from screwing up their lives, yeah.

Lorrie: Trying to keep them from doing what he did, knowing that if he doesn't care, nobody will care. So yeah, Snape has this excellent defense. He says, "Oh, I thought Voldemort was finished, just like everybody else."

JC: "Just like your husband."

Lorrie: Yeah. Later on, we'll find out that actually Snape never thought Voldemort was finished, but hey, great defense! Then poor Bellatrix says, all resentful, "Yes, but I was a true believer," which Snape mercilessly mocks because the weakness for Bellatrix is that Voldemort does not actually care that she was a true believer, and that's the problem with Voldemort: if you want something from him, you're always at a disadvantage. Snape's secret is that he wants nothing from Voldemort. Snape finally (finally, finally) gets to play the Defense Against the Dark Arts card that he and Dumbledore had been building up for years by finally saying, "No, Dumbledore wouldn't let me teach that because he thought it would bring about a relapse." We can see what they were doing (Dumbledore and Snape) by undercutting their own foundation here: Dumbledore simultaneously tells the whole world "I trust Snape," and puts out this rumor so that the whole foundation is built on doubt.

JC: I love how Bellatrix is like, "This was your sacrifice for the Dark Lord, not to teach your favorite subject?"

Lorrie: That's not what he had said, but he lets it go.

JC: I can see him rolling his eyes. 'Really? That's the best comeback you've got here?' Oh, my God.

Lorrie: "I didn't say that." I like when he loses it with her when she accuses him of staying comfortable instead of going to jail. He's like, "Yes!" That wasn't even something that he had prepared; he just can't believe how stupid she's being.

JC: "Look at the other Death Eaters that did the same thing: Lucius Malfoy in his mansion..."

Lorrie: "What did you get for being in Azkaban? Yeah, yeah, yeah." Fandom has noted that Bellatrix's secondary house is Hufflepuff.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: This whole disagreement, he is exposing her as a crappy Slytherin. "What the hell kind of Slytherin are you? Yes, I protected myself by staying out of jail. What?!"

JC: I see. Okay, that's interesting.

Lorrie: "But -- but I proved my loyalty!" "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Much good did it do you..." He also puts down Quirrell, which she cannot resist -- it's like catnip; she loves putting down other Death Eaters -- and then when she's like, "Well, you returned late when he showed up!" "Yes, on Dumbledore's orders, because unlike you, I'm a grown-up. I have complicated duties."

JC: Exactly. Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Yeah. Then she's very angry that Snape has never put himself in danger. He always comes up with these weaselly excuses. To me, that's intriguing; that suggests to me that Snape has never cast an Unforgivable at this point. It's not conclusive, but it does set up what he has to do later in this volume as being even more difficult. Painfully, he takes partial credit for Emmeline Vance and Sirius being killed, which I guess you have to do if you're a double agent, but that works really well to create the ambiguity about this character. 'Well, is he happy about it? Eh...'

JC: But he describes them as murders, which if your group is going after someone that you think needs to be gotten rid of, you wouldn't call that killing a murder; that's what you call it when you believe it was wrong. I just found that an interesting word choice on Snape's behalf.

Lorrie: Well, he's taking credit for it.

JC: Yeah. I love how he explains away Quirrell from Book One, and he basically just says, "I didn't know it was Voldemort. I just saw a mediocre wizard trying to get to the Philosopher's Stone and I stopped him, yeah. I didn't know Voldemort..." Yeah. It's unexpected to hear Snape say, "Yeah, I didn't know. I made a mistake. Oops!" That's just really funny.

Lorrie: And he's quite protected, because Lucius and all the other Death Eaters have just made a much, much bigger mistake...

JC: Right, right, yeah.

Lorrie: So yeah, whatever.

JC: Oh, my gosh.

Lorrie: Then we get this fascinating look at the line that Dumbledore and Snape are taking: "If I had murdered Harry Potter, the Dark Lord could not have used his blood to regenerate, making him invincible --" Oh, so that's the lie that Snape and Dumbledore are trying to make sure Voldemort believes -- "Oh, yes, that was a good move. A smart move. You're now invincible!" -- while Dumbledore knows that taking Harry's blood means Voldemort is now permanently subject to Lily's protection of Harry. That's part of the argument that Snape is building up here: how to undermine Voldemort by making him falsely confident. Oh, yeah, here he moves right into invoking, "I think the fascinating rumor that Harry... Maybe this child was a dark wizard," and then puts down Harry, saying, "Mediocre to the last degree..." What a safe defense!

JC: "He shouldn't even be in this school, he's so mediocre."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Come on, Snape, that's a stretch. Come on.

Lorrie: It's not, though, because Snape despises Harry so much that it's one of those lies that would show up as true.

JC: Yeah, that's true. The other thing I'll say is that Snape only sees Harry in his own class where Harry doesn't perform very well. He doesn't see him in every other class; he vaguely is aware that he plays Quidditch, but that doesn't count.

Snape has not been in the room when Harry has been good at something or done something well, really, so yeah. I guess what I'm saying is from a teacher perspective, it is really easy for teachers to get this tunnel vision about their students.

Lorrie: Right, right.

JC: All you see is what you see in your own class, and when you find out that they won an award in some other subject, you're like, "Them? What? Really?!"

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I think that Snape has some tunnel vision about Harry because of Potions that is helpful in this instance.

Lorrie: There is that, but also Snape saw him with his aptitude for Occlumency and the lessons that he couldn't teach. Snape knows that the first time Harry tried, he was able to push back, and he knows perfectly well that Harry's actually gifted in that. This is a subject in which Snape, through gritted teeth, complimented Harry more than once, and he started off the Occlumency lessons by saying, "It's not that different from throwing off Imperius, and I'm told that you're good at that," so he knows he's lying. He does find Harry mediocre in many areas, which is the truth he's drawing on, and his abundant contempt for Harry infuses every put-down with a ring of truth. That's how he's authenticating, but it's also a very safe defense because the things Harry is good at, the Death Eaters don't even recognize. This is a really safe defense for Snape, and this is what he's using again to undercut Voldemort's confidence by appearing to build him up by saying, "Oh, no, no, Harry is completely nothing." Well then, why does Voldemort keep being bested by him? Hmm... He's, through this backwards way, building up Voldemort's insecurity, and that is actually what Voldemort is interested in. Not so much the sycophancy, but the puzzle that has absorbed Voldemort is 'Why? Why can't I win over this kid?' That is, in fact, the issue.

JC: I like that in the midst of that lie, he is building up this idea that could get back to Voldemort. "He's non-special. He's just been lucky."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. "Don't focus on him so much. It's really not that important."

Lorrie: "It's definitely not Harry."

JC: "It's not him." Yeah. I like that that's happening, too.

Lorrie: Yeah. "Voldemort is definitely the most powerful wizard ever. Definitely."

JC: "Harry Potter... No, no."

Lorrie: "Nothing. Nothing."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: "The answer does not lie there."

JC: 'Deflect, deflect.' Yeah.

Lorrie: Yes. Oh, I love this moment: "... a simple combination of sheer luck and more talented friends." Snape, you have been noticing Hermione after all. Okay!

JC: A nice little compliment to Hermione. Yes, yes.

Lorrie: Because who else could he possibly mean?

JC: Yeah, this is true.

Lorrie: Is he complimenting Ron Weasley? No, I don't think so.

JC: Neville Longbottom? No.

Lorrie: No.

JC: It's got to be Hermione, yeah.

Lorrie: That's the only -- Yeah.

JC: Yes. Everyone recognized Hermione's brilliance.

Lorrie: Yeah, he does notice her. Then oh, the greatest operation to undermine Voldemort: this lie that he and Dumbledore have made up that Dumbledore has this weakness that he has to believe the best of people.

JC: Ooh, yeah.

Lorrie: This is not only downplaying, of course, how shrewd Dumbledore is, but it is feeding the belief that the Death Eaters have or people like the Death Eaters have, which is that thinking well of others is stupid and weak.

JC: Yeah. Caring about other people is a weakness, yeah.

Lorrie: Right. They will die before they give up that belief, so it's really fail-safe.

JC: Yeah. That read so clearly to me, I think, even on the first read as Snape building up something there, because I didn't believe that about Dumbledore at this point. But yeah, it reads even more clearly now after coming back to it.

Lorrie: Oh, okay. Another thing that Snape can say that the Death Eaters will not be able to parse: "I spun him a tale of deepest remorse..." Snape means that genuinely, but he's hoping to get it across cynically, and that's the only way Death Eaters could understand such a thing. Then he says, "Oh, Dumbledore never allowed me near the Dark Arts than he could help." That is so totally not true. Who does Dumbledore always call for whenever there's something to do with the Dark Arts? Who's the only person --

JC: Not the teacher he hired.

Lorrie: Yeah. Of course, at the end of this volume, we'll find out that Dumbledore really relied on Snape to go back to the Dark Arts. Ouch! Then there is a complete and outright lie here: "I'm pleased to say, however, that Dumbledore is growing old. The duel with the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than they once were."

JC: The injury part is real. The rest of it?

Lorrie: This has nothing to do with his reactions, but as long as he has this terrible injury, that's not a bad way to advance this narrative. The main thing we get from this invention of Snape's is that he and Dumbledore have thoroughly gone over this before this meeting. They have thoroughly cooked up this explanation, so that definitely accounts for a lot of the absolute rock-solid security that Snape has in being ready for whatever Bellatrix is going to throw at him. No, they've worked this through.

JC: They're somewhere in here, and maybe it was earlier in the discussion, when Snape says a complete truth that is amazing and mocking Bellatrix: "You think that he is mistaken (speaking of Voldemort)? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen?" He's just bragging at that point.

Lorrie: Yes, he is!

JC: He's like, "Really, you think I'm capable of all that?"

Lorrie: "Nobody is. It would take a great wizard..."

JC: "A genius of his generation..." Yeah. It's just so funny, because it's like, 'Okay, Snape.' Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, who does that? Barty Crouch Jr. does that, too, when he is pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody and saying, "It would take a really powerful wizard to hoodwink the Goblet of Fire."

JC: Oh, yeah. Mmm...

Lorrie: Mmm, yes.

JC: A legend in his own mind. Yeah.

Lorrie: Truthfully. Oh, love this line: "He has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord." Yeah, that is everything. Everything hinges on that. No matter which side you're on, Snape and Dumbledore start off with that truth: that Dumbledore trusts Snape. They can depend on Death Eaters to think that nobody deserves trust -- that's just stupid -- and they can depend on Dumbledore's followers to doubt Snape. Anyone who, like me, enjoys contemplating the well-constructed character that is Snape, this is really enjoyable.

JC: I don't know how anyone doesn't enjoy this, honestly. This is great. Maybe someone listening will be able to illuminate me, but do you remember when Trump and Musk were going at each other? I wasn't rooting for either of them, but I was loving it. I was like, 'Oh, yeah, keep it going!'

Lorrie: Deathmatch, yeah.

JC: Even if you don't like Snape, you've got to enjoy...

Lorrie: Funny, yeah.

JC: You've got to enjoy this Death Eater infighting. It's great!

Lorrie: Well, one thing that I've noticed about people who cannot enjoy this (the sheer virtuosity of the Snape character as it is being built up in this chapter) is if his

abusiveness (especially earlier in the series) reminds them of something unresolved in their own past. If his character reminds them of an abuser who has gotten away with it because they're good at something else, that is an old, extremely personal grievance that registers as dangerous to a lot of survivors. Once you start saying, "But he was such a promising swimmer at Stanford," oh, my God, shut up! So what?! Who cares if he's an interesting character, if he's well written, if Bellatrix is a satisfying opponent? Is this an excuse for people to not hold him accountable for certain kinds of abuses? That's something where I think that *within* this story, it's well accounted for, but that's not how readers read. If you're somebody that has been disadvantaged by people wanting to shy away from holding people accountable for their bad actions, yeah, this is going to bug the shit out of you.

JC: Okay, that makes sense.

Lorrie: It's not the exact terms of the story as it's being written; it's readers' reactions to how other readers are talking about the story and enjoying this. So yeah, there are things about Snape's backstory that affect me a lot more; probably, the tiny detail that affects me the most about Snape is the memory of him being a small child crying while his father is shouting at his mother. I know there are a lot of people who really dismiss that and say, "So what? A lot of people come from very disturbed backgrounds. That doesn't make them mean to children." Yeah, that's true. It's just whatever catches your feelings as a reader, so yes.

JC: So he has taken apart all of Bellatrix's arguments...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: He's put her in her place, and he's like, "So, Narcissa, why are you here?"

Lorrie: Right, and Bellatrix feels worse than before. He hasn't answered a single one of her doubts; she now distrusts him even more than she did before, but now, he's even more hateful in her eyes. She's having a bad day. Yeah, now Narcissa. Oh, gosh...

JC: I think that this is the moment in the story where I changed my mind about Narcissa. She was just this two-dimensional, Stepford Death Eater wife (Draco's mom, whatever), and I love that she gets fleshed out here in a way that made her... I really understand her in a way that I did not expect to here. Her devotion to her

child, compared to Bellatrix's devotion to Voldemort... I think that's part of it. Whether you're a parent or not, I think everyone can understand that idea that you spoke of before, which is that they're someone that you care about more so much that you sacrifice your own well-being to make sure they're okay. That's a feeling that many of us have about someone in our lives. Bellatrix, even later, says something like, "Well, if I had sons, I would be happy to sacrifice him to the Dark Lord," and Narcissa just screams at that.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's just so awful to her. But the idea that this makes Narcissa... We see where her loyalties lie. Her loyalties will always lie with her son. Always, like ride or die. "My kid..." She's given up on her husband, it feels like to me, at this point. Whatever Lucius does... 'Okay, he's going to do things... He's going to ruin our lives, he's going to do whatever shit he has to do. I can't do anything about that, but my kid... That's something I'm going to try to make a difference. I'm going to try to do something to protect him.' I feel that. I don't know. That's just so human.

Lorrie: I'm going to disagree with you on Lucius.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: I don't think she has given up on Lucius, because we see, when Bellatrix puts down Lucius earlier in this chapter, Narcissa flares up at her and says, "Don't you *dare* speak ill of my husband!"

JC: Yeah, so I guess she hasn't gotten to that point. I'm mixing this up with what happens in Book Seven, but it gets bad in Book Seven.

Lorrie: It does, but she doesn't stop being half of a couple with Lucius. At no point does she look at him like, 'I can't believe he screwed us over like that.' She doesn't. I continue to defend Lucius and Narcissa as the single most functional heterosexual couple of this series.

JC: That's just wild.

Lorrie: Ay, ay, ay...

JC: Well, I guess my point... Okay, the point I'm trying to make is that she's going to protect Draco before she's going to do what would be best for Lucius. That's the choice.

Lorrie: And there's nothing he can do from jail. She has to go find Draco another protector. That's her job. Lucius would do it if he were around; he's not, so what is she going to do? She has to go find somebody else.

JC: Yeah. Okay, I'm narrowing my point.

Lorrie: Sorry. Sorry, sorry.

JC: No, my point is that Draco is the focus. She can't do anything to help her husband, she can't do anything to protect her husband where he's at.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: He can't do anything to protect anybody else, but I think that even if Lucius was in the picture, she would do whatever to protect Draco because that's her focus.

Lorrie: Well, at the beginning of *Goblet of Fire*, we hear Draco telling Crabbe and Goyle about Narcissa negotiating Lucius down from sending Draco to Durmstrang. "No, I want him at home," so she has been clear about this from the beginning.

JC: Yeah. I can only respect her in this whole scene. Just respect.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Okay, her motives are so understandable here, and it's like, 'God, wow.' I know the first time I read this, I remember just being really stunned by that. I was not expecting to come out of this going, 'Well, maybe I misjudged her.'

Lorrie: I would be more angry at Lucius than she is.

JC: Maybe that's it: I am angry at Lucius. Maybe that's the problem, because I'm like, 'Girl...' I'm thinking of Reddit relationship threads. I'm imagining the thread that Narcissa would write, and people would be like, "Girl, leave him!"

Lorrie: Yeah, and there's zero evidence that she's thinking, "I told him not to go to those stupid Death Eater meetings. I told him." She doesn't come across that way. But yeah, he is in jail, so she has to find Draco another protector. She is violating

Voldemort's order not to speak of the plan. She has made that decision; this is a completely binary decision, knowing exactly what it means if he finds out that she's doing this. I admire how the author wrote this so well that the plan is never named, which is a plot point for most of this book, but we can tell what it probably is or what kind of thing it probably is. So well done.

JC: I don't think I could guess it, though. That was a mystery. I remember that being a mystery. 'What is it that Draco was supposed to do?' I wasn't sure until we got towards the end of the book.

Lorrie: The way that Narcissa says, "How could Draco do that when not even Voldemort can?" Uh-oh. Ugh... Oh, dear. Snape's boundaries and his matter-of-factness to me are the best things about him in this chapter. The times when he says stuff like, "If the Dark Lord said don't talk about it, don't. Yes, the Dark Lord is angry. No, I'm not going to try to persuade him. What do you think I am, stupid?" When he talks like that, I love that. There's none of this fawning, no cringing; it's just, "No, you know how he is," and that makes him so trustworthy from Narcissa's point of view, I think. He's not going to talk about how she should be feeling or anything. Snape peers out of the curtains; once again, somebody in this chapter making sure that they're not overheard. I used to think... On first and second read, I thought, 'Is he making eye contact with Dumbledore? Is Dumbledore outside, invisible?' No, no, he's not. He is making sure that they're not overheard, and he's also taking himself a moment. He has to collect himself because Narcissa has been drilling into his eyes, and no, he has to figure out: is he going to do this? Is he going to conspire with Narcissa? How distressed she is is undoing him; he can't make eye contact with her or talk to her while he's thinking about this, because she's so upset and he feels it. Of course, when he says, "Oh, yeah, it happens that I know about the plan," Bellatrix is so jealous in the most predictable, tedious, trifling way. "You know, too?" "Yes. Oh, my God, shut up."

JC: Okay, so here's a question. That was the thing that even on this read, I was wondering. Before they came in, did he read this in Narcissa's mind? Did he put together the clues and figure it out, or did he actually know about it before they came? It seems like you have a perspective on that.

Lorrie: We find out later that he knew.

JC: That he knew, okay. See, I don't remember the book; that would be helpful. But yeah, okay, he did know.

Lorrie: Yeah. We don't know at this point, although the way that Snape is drawn... If he's going to say, "It so happens that I know of the plan," he wouldn't gamble with that. I think it's pretty safe to assume that anything he says here, he has to be absolutely certain is going to stand up to scrutiny. But yeah, we do find out later no, he knew.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: He was in a position where if there's a knock on the door, he knows exactly what it is. It's like Nearly Headless Nick after Sirius Black dies, and Harry Potter is chasing him down. 'Oh, no... Here we go. All right. Can't say I didn't know it was coming.' Narcissa says plainly the truth: she knows that it's vengeance for Lucius's mistake. Ow... She says Draco's excited to be doing this because he's sixteen. We don't know yet that this brings up very specific, bad memories for Snape, although we do know that for him to have been nineteen or twenty by the time he reneges that he had to have been pretty young to join Voldemort, and we know that Regulus was also that young. Then I love the series of methods that Narcissa tries to appeal to Snape. She says, "You're Draco's favorite teacher." That works. "You're Lucius's old friend." That also works. "You're the Dark Lord's favorite." Eh. Well, he's supposed to act like that would work.

JC: That felt like a dig at her sister, too.

Lorrie: Well, it is, and also that's the way that most Death Eaters are vain and insecure.

JC: Yeah. "But he trusts you..."

Lorrie: Yeah. If Snape were what he's pretending to be, then that would have worked. "You would succeed, of course you would..." appealing to his vanity, which eh, but she's trying. That was a darn good effort from her. She covered a lot of bases there, and two of them hit home. Yeah. How is he Draco's favorite teacher? They have built up an actual relationship over classroom hours. How is he Lucius's old friend? They go back a long way, and based on those things, she's

clutching Snape's robes and saying, "You could do it. You could do it instead of Draco," which took my breath away with how audacious that is. Wow...

JC: And she's on her knees, too, right? She's begging on her knees at this point.

Lorrie: Not a small ask. It's not an obvious ask, either. That's... Wow, really?

JC: "Would you murder someone for my child, please?" Yeah.

Lorrie: That's so audacious.

JC: "You're his favorite teacher."

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah. "It's in your contract, right?" But I do love that the way she appeals to him that works is bonds of affection that are real, and they're based on who he truly is on the inside as a person. He really is the person who is Draco's favorite teacher; whatever agreements or disagreements he has with Lucius, they are actually friends. This is so much more affirming than her coming in by saying, "Oh, well, you're the slimiest and greasiest, but the cleverest," or people sucking up to someone because of status or whatever. She's calling on him for things that are his true self, and he holds her wrists and takes her hands away, but then he looks into her face -- which he had been avoiding until now -- and he admits slowly... He's speaking slowly (which he does when he's thinking really hard): "He intends me to do it in the end, I think, but he is determined that Draco should try first." Wow... What do you think of that? I heard a thought.

JC: Well, my first thought was 'he' could be either Voldemort or Dumbledore there in some sense. Who's the 'he' that we're referring to? The first sentence is the one: "I think he intends for me to do it in the end." That's what made me think that could be Dumbledore.

Lorrie: So then Snape says, "You see, in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds, I shall be able to remain at Hogwarts a little longer, fulfilling my useful role as spy." Wow! Snape is negotiating. He's buying time for Dumbledore to live. He's finding an argument that Narcissa will accept in favor of Snape leaving Dumbledore alive as long as possible. Geez... Not an easy job Snape has here, huh?

JC: So before this moment, did Snape already know that he was going to step in and do this so that Draco didn't have to? Was this plan already in motion, and the Unbreakable Vow that Narcissa asks him to make is just... I guess I'm wondering

what changed. He already knew about the plan (he says, "I think that it was always going to be me"), he already knows that this is where he's headed. What does the Unbreakable Vow change here?

Lorrie: We don't find this out until the end of the next volume.

JC: Oh... Okay.

Lorrie: That question is deliberately opened here and then not answered for the readers for the rest of *Half-Blood Prince* and most of *Deathly Hallows*. Yes. By this time, we will find out later that Snape totally already knew that he was going to have to do these things, so in that sense, the Unbreakable Vow changes nothing. It does not change what he was already planning. He had already promised Dumbledore that he was going to do everything in his power to protect Draco, make sure that Draco did not damage himself by trying to kill Dumbledore, and eventually kill Dumbledore in Draco's stead. Narcissa does not realize that she's asking him to do things he's already promised to do. Those things are not changed.

JC: It's also interesting to me that Narcissa asks him to make the Unbreakable Vow; in the film version, they had Bellatrix say it, and I thought it's completely different. When Bellatrix says in the film version, it's like she's trapping Snape into this. She's being so clever; she's finally got one back on him. I think I'd seen the movie several times (obviously) since I last read this, so I was surprised when I read this again to see that Narcissa asks him to make it and how that makes this scene feel very differently because Snape has already agreed to it. He's making this vow to Draco's mom, trying to reassure her rather than that he's being entrapped by Bellatrix. It's a very different feeling.

Lorrie: Yeah, no, Bellatrix has a long way to go to catch up here. She's left in the dust. Yeah, I think the proportion of reading the books versus watching the movies... You and I have them reversed.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: I may have seen this movie maybe three times, but that was a long time ago. I liked it, actually; I think that's an unpopular opinion in that the *Half-Blood Prince* movie adaptation is not a popular one. I loved it. Anyway... but yeah. Bellatrix says the thing that you pointed out earlier, the one that really confirms

that she's evil despite having sisterly affection: "If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!" Okay. First of all, obviously, Bellatrix, you don't know what you would think if you had sons. Easy for you to say; you have no idea! But then there's that chilling possibility... Oh, maybe she would. That's, oh, ever so much worse, but you could actually see it happening, right?

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh... Yeah.

JC: It's so interesting to me, because I think it's positioning the childless woman against the woman who has a child and drawing this contrast between them ('Oh, she can't possibly understand'). But in the same room, we have a childless man who understands that no, you don't sacrifice a child like this. It's really interesting, because I think there's an argument to be made that she's saying that 'women who don't have children are just horrible, selfish creatures...' Bellatrix, being the way she is. But the fact that Snape steps up and says, "I'll protect this child with my life..." Yeah. You don't have to be a parent to have that kind of care for another person, and I think that Snape makes that clear here.

Lorrie: Although we find out that he once chose the other way, and when baby Harry's life was in question, he didn't care about it at all; he has since changed. Bellatrix is Snape's opponent for Draco's future in this scene, somebody who possibly could in an alternate timeline be one of those parents who does sacrifice their own children and does not lose sleep over it. Those people do exist. That's who he's fighting.

JC: It's also interesting to me that there's an alternate timeline in which Bellatrix did not go to Azkaban and grew up as Draco's quirky aunt. In that case, would she have blithely sent him off to be murdered? I don't know.

Lorrie: Well...

JC: Hard to know.

Lorrie: We find out later in this volume that Draco learns Occlumency from her.

JC: So he does look to her as an aunt, but yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and she's really excited that she's got a junior rising star in her family and she's training him; Narcissa is not crazy about this, and Snape has to try to protect him from it. Of course, Draco himself at sixteen is not helping matters; he's all excited. Of course... Also, I don't like Narcissa as much as a lot of people do. Often in fandom, you have people saying, "Oh, Narcissa, she's such a mom," or "She's a fascinating character." Meanwhile, I'm like, 'She's still a Nazi mom. She's like this about her own brat. She's not like this about anyone else's.' But what I can't help but notice is Narcissa's not sacrificing herself at all.

JC: True. That's true. If Voldemort finds out, Voldemort's going to... She is risking the wrath, but she's asking other people to take much bigger risks than she is.

Lorrie: Even if Voldemort finds out that she does this, nothing Voldemort does to her because of that would be worse for her than being upset at whatever he's going to do to Draco.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: That's the thing that's going to ruin her life.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Trying to do something to prevent it can only improve her life...

JC: True.

Lorrie: But she's not putting herself in greater danger here; she's getting somebody else to promise...

JC: Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: To sacrifice themselves so that she can worry less. Unlike Bellatrix, she's being a true Slytherin here. Oh, Snape makes his choice. This is where we differentiate between what this Unbreakable Vow does and does not change for him. We know that he's already sworn to somebody that he would protect Draco and kill Dumbledore. He is already protecting Harry Potter, a child he doesn't love, for the sake of a mother who is dead and cannot thank him, whose memory fills him with well-deserved guilt. That is a very unrewarding job that he's had, to protect the life of Harry Potter; now, he is doing the same thing for a child he actually likes for a mother who he can help. He can materially make Narcissa's life

so much better and she will thank him, and they have bonds -- he doesn't feel guilt about them; he can actually do something. When you save one person, it makes it easier to save others. This horrendous burden that Narcissa's putting on him is, for once, making Snape's job and lot in life easier. It's so much better to do this nearly impossible job for somebody you actually like -- for a family that you have bonds with -- and not just trying to repay a debt that you know you can never, by definition, ever repay. The other thing that this helps Snape with: this is the first time, probably since he became an adult, that he's ever been the most important person in somebody's life.

JC: Ooh.

Lorrie: We can gather by the end of the series that his mother cared for him a great deal. We don't know that for a fact yet, but there's nobody who needs Snape this way. Well, we also find out later that he has become that recently for Dumbledore, too. We don't know that yet, but Narcissa asking, "Will you do this?"... Suddenly he is now the most important person in this family's life. That changes the whole purpose of your life. Much later in *Cursed Child*, we see that when Scorpius says, "Severus Snape, it's an honor," and you start to think, 'Oh.' If you don't think about Snape from the Harry or Neville perspective -- if you think about it purely from a Draco Malfoy family perspective -- oh, he's somebody totally different to them, to this family.

JC: Yeah. I like that idea that later on, once Snape is gone, both Draco and Harry have a chance to reflect on what Snape did for them in their lives.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And that they both come to the conclusion of, "Oh, wow..."

Lorrie: "That was a lot."

JC: "That was a lot," and that Draco knew that Snape was always on his side in a way that Harry didn't. Snape is also going to get to experience in this book what it's like to have a sixteen-year-old kid.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: All the unpleasant parts of it.

Lorrie: Oh, God...

JC: But you care about this kid. You want them to make the right choices and they're just not doing it, and you yell at them and tell them whatever. Snape's going to get to experience some fatherhood here.

Lorrie: "I'm going to help you despite yourself." Yeah. So yeah, Narcissa is totally pushing it with this Unbreakable Vow, this outlandish Unbreakable Vow. That gives Snape an advantage over Bellatrix that he totally was not expecting; it just fell into his lap.

JC: Yeah. I didn't think about it that way, but yeah. And even if Wormtail snuck back down the stairs and is listening, this only helps Snape.

Lorrie: It's so great.

JC: It was something he was going to do anyway.

Lorrie: What a bonus, because at this point, Bellatrix totally doubts that he's going to accept it, and I, the reader, am also totally doubting it. At this point, the first time I was reading it, I fully expected to hear one of his roundabout rationalizations for why he can't accept this and how stupid I am for thinking that he could. No, he accepts it. I'm shocked, Bellatrix is shocked. One million points to Snape.

JC: Yeah. It works on a lot of levels, because if he was trapped into doing this, it works; if he wasn't trapped into doing this, it works. There's a lot of ways you can interpret this that would carry you forward believing the version of Snape that you want to believe in, and it's really cool that at this point, there's still evidence of whatever side Snape is on.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: You can read it a lot of ways.

Lorrie: And whatever way you read it, you cannot dismiss his importance.

JC: True.

Lorrie: This is the point in the series where he becomes elevated to a really, really pivotal player instead of one of the teachers.

JC: Skulking in the shadows, that shows up when you don't want him to...

Lorrie: Yeah. Mysteriously shows up, yeah. But yeah, I thought he was going to find an excuse to get out of it. I was gobsmacked when he said, "Yeah, I'll do it," and he keeps eye contact with Narcissa; this is a character who cannot usually tolerate intimate emotion. When I first was trying to analyze this character shortly after *Deathly Hallows* was published, I couldn't figure out for a long time: Did his mother love him? This was the scene that made me realize, 'Oh, his mother loved him,' because he can tolerate the eye contact with Narcissa in this moment. This is in contrast to how Voldemort couldn't tolerate feeling Harry's intensity missing Sirius. This kind of powerful emotion, where a parent cares about you so much that they would come and do this... It's in our natures to crave it. If you craved it your whole life and never had it, that would feel one way. Snape is keeping eye contact with Narcissa during this extreme moment; he doesn't waver. He can tolerate this. Somebody loved him; in fact, if you look throughout the series, he is always kind to mothers, Snape. There's no bad blood between him and Molly Weasley, even. He speaks quietly here; Bellatrix is so astonished that she can't resist the way she ought to be doing right now -- she just has no defenses. And I find this so painful: this is the closest that Snape ever gets in his life to a wedding.

JC: Okay, that was a point that I was thinking about, too: that it feels like a wedding.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: You're being hand-fastened, you're on your knees, staring into each other's eyes. You're making a vow together. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And there's a child involved, right? Yeah.

Lorrie: And it's not because somebody wants him. It's not that he's going to be loved, but he is going to be needed. He won't be loved, but he'll have to love. Three times, Narcissa asks him to swear an oath; three times, he says, "I will." He's being called upon as a teacher. He's not a father, he's not just a friend. What is he? He's a teacher. Then Narcissa says, "If it seems Draco will fail... (Snape's hand twitched within hers, but he did not draw away), will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?" That's something that she springs on him. They don't discuss ahead of time; she says it while they're already in progress. He

could have said no -- he could have stopped at this point -- but he doesn't. That twitch is the moment that shows Snape is being brave. It's not that he doesn't have self-preservation (he does); it's natural in him (that's the twitch) and he is steadfast. He knowingly, resolutely overrides that. It's his will. Yes, he has that natural inclination to pull away and protect himself, and no, he's not going to go with it. He has a different purpose; he has chosen. With this promise, Snape has now become their family because the Unbreakable Vow has rewired him. He, for the rest of his life or until the vow is fulfilled, has become rewired to be conscious of Draco at all times -- asleep or awake -- primed to rush to Draco's aid like a parent. He now (Snape) has to keep himself safe and alive because Draco's life depends on it. A whole family depends on Snape to keep himself alive and safe, and that is chivalry. This is why chivalrous knights used to ride into battle carrying a woman's favor, like a ribbon or handkerchief; if you only depend on your own love for yourself to survive, that might not be enough. People can give up on themselves, but if you have to stay alive for the sake of somebody else, that gives you more power. Chivalry is putting yourself at risk when you don't have to to protect somebody else, so protectiveness increases your power as a human.

JC: I am now imagining Snape in knight armor.

Lorrie: Yeah, actually.

JC: I also think it's interesting that in the previous volume, Harry was left with "I have to kill Voldemort or he's going to kill me," with this choice; then here's Snape. Not that it's a choice -- it's not a choice for Harry, either -- but "I'm going to have to kill Dumbledore or something bad will happen to Draco."

Lorrie: Right.

JC: "Or I'll die." That's the other thing with the Unbreakable Vow.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: They're both in the same situation in that way.

Lorrie: The parallels that this chapter sets up are endless and beautiful. At the end of this chapter, all the stakes on where Snape's loyalties lie have been raised to this screaming tension level, and Narcissa... she must feel better. She's done something for her kid, and Bellatrix has unwittingly committed really, really bad treason

against Voldemort. She should have pulled out, but no, no, no; now she's stuck having been the bonder for this thing that violates Voldemort's orders. Okay... That's not what she had in mind when she set out.

JC: True, and that's just the second chapter. Woo!

Lorrie: The next chapter is called Will and Won't.

JC: And I have no idea what happens, but I think we're going back to Harry, maybe.

Lorrie: Yeah. There's a kid called Harry that shows up in this chapter.

JC: There's a kid called Harry that shows up in his book. Yeah.

Lorrie: He's a teenager.

JC: And then, I guess, at some point, we're going to meet Slughorn, right?

Lorrie: We are!

JC: Wow! My gosh...

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