HARRY POTTER AFTER 2020
with LORRIE KIM and JC

Transcript

Episode 7.1

Book 7, Chapter 1: The Dark Lord Ascending

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 Seven, Chapter One: The Dark Lord Ascending.

Lorrie: The Dark Lord Ascending. Following the death of Dumbledore, Voldemort has taken over Malfoy Manor as headquarters. He summons the Death Eaters to a meeting and stages an execution in front of them. So that's my summary of the chapter, but I'm not mentally prepared to be right there at this point yet. What about you, JC?

JC: Okay, yeah, there's a lot.

Lorrie: I find that the level of polish and just plain expertise that Rowling brought to *Half-Blood Prince*... I don't think it was possible for her to maintain that for *Deathly Hallows*, because the number of things she was trying to achieve with the writing of *Deathly Hallows* was just way, way more difficult. For one thing, the international pressure she was on to bring this series to a close… That pressure was infinite, and she really set herself up with a lot of plot lines to tie up.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh…

JC: That's a thing that even my partner was asking me the other day — "Were any plot lines left dangling?" — and I couldn't think of any plots that were not resolved. Maybe things were resolved not in a way people wanted them to be, but I feel like it all came together in the end. But you know what? Again, I haven't read this book for a while. We're going to find out.

Lorrie: We're going to find out, yeah.

JC: Maybe I'm wrong.

Lorrie: Yeah. This book is messy because, on the one hand, she's trying to finish up plot lines and bring to rest this enormous world that she's created; then on the other, she's trying to write about the things that matter most to her. If she got this book wrong, then she would be letting down herself — her desire to create something where she can really say what matters to her as a human in this world, in this life — so based on that, I am very respectful of what she achieved. It's messy… That proves it's not AI.

JC: Right? Right.

Lorrie: This is her soul, or what her soul looked like.

JC: At the time that she wrote it.

Lorrie: In 2007.

Hosts: Yeah.

Lorrie: Not what it looks like now. Who knows…

JC: Oh, this makes it a very interesting thing. So yeah, this book came out in 2007. This summer…

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Around the time we finish it, it will be twenty years old, this book, which is very interesting.

Lorrie: Right. We are currently at the 'Nineteen Years Later' of the epilogue.

JC: Holy shit!

Lorrie: Yes, we are.

JC: Oh, my God!

Lorrie: Yes, we are!

JC: Okay. As of recording this, it is September 2026…

Lorrie: Nineteen Years Later…

JC: Nineteen Years Later, and Harry is sending his youngest off to Hogwarts, and the amazing parallel is that you and I just sent our babies off to college.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: We're both empty nesters as of a couple of weeks ago…

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: And so is Harry.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: So are Harry and Ginny and Ron and Hermione. Oh, my God… And Draco Malfoy.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: They're all empty nesters right now. Holy crap.

Lorrie: Harry and Ginny still have the little one.

JC: Oh, they have one more, okay.

Lorrie: Lily Luna.

JC: That's right.

Lorrie: Lily Luna.

JC: The kids who all were named after other people, yeah.

Lorrie: But Albus, the one that they're the most worried about, has just gone off. Albus right now, in the timeline of *Cursed Child*, is in his second week as a Potter who was sorted into Slytherin…

JC: Oh, my God, this is amazing.

Lorrie: Yeah, and is crap at flying.

JC: Aaawww…

Lorrie: I know.

JC: Oh, bless his heart, oh…

Lorrie: And anyone who tells Ginny and Harry that he'll be fine and they don't have to worry is lying.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, my God, I could cry.

JC: This is so real in my life right now.

Lorrie: This is so real.

JC: It's very real. We've had an incredible number of coincidences in our recording of this; I think this one is up there with Voldemort coming back on Inauguration Day. I think this one's up there with that for me, personally. Amazing.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Okay, yeah. This is the epilogue. Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Yes. Here we are at Nineteen Years Later.

JC: Wow… Okay!

Lorrie: Yep. So like I said, I don't feel prepared to talk about this, but on the other hand, here's where we are.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Meanwhile, politically, current events these days are so bleak that in order to function, I have to artificially shut out a lot of my awareness of what's happening just so that I can be sane and emotionally healthy enough to fight it all. One of the reasons why I don't feel prepared to talk about this chapter of this book is that the experience of living in a world so much worse and more degraded than the one that Voldemort is ushering in is so profoundly depressing compared to how fantastical it felt to me as a reader in 2007. In 2007, we looked at the filthy degradation of the world that Voldemort is celebrating in this chapter and wow,

yuck! That is what would happen if things were that bad, yes, and look at how excited Voldemort is at his shiny new promotion, because things are starting to work out the way he wants; his plans are coming together, he's so excited, and he's, in this chapter, taking the opportunity to set the tone and he's completely in control. We are so far beyond that, where we're living in the U.S. in September 2026; it is currently two months away from the U.S. midterm elections that will take place in November 2026, halfway through Trump's second term.

JC: Oh, by the time people listen to this, that will have happened already, I'm sure.

Lorrie: Exactly.

JC: We're speaking to you from the past.

Lorrie: And that happened to us two years ago when we were recording before the election pitting Trump against Kamala Harris. Yesterday — last night — Trump… One of the things that he pulled out of his ass was to promise five thousand dollars to each U.S. citizen if Republicans win both the House and Senate during the midterms. His degree of desperation… We don't get Voldemort reaching that degree of desperation until the very, very end of this book when Voldemort is literally falling apart. We are so far beyond. Meanwhile, this author — J.K. Rowling in 2026 — has strong-armed Amnesty International and is threatening the NHS in Britain. There's a way in which the stage that Voldemort is in at the beginning of this chapter is almost cute.

JC: Yeah, and even as this chapter goes on, there's this sense of impending doom. Something else that just happened a couple of days ago is that one of the really high-up people from Anthropic resigned and then put out a statement saying there's a ten percent chance that AI will kill us all in a few years.

Lorrie: Yeah, right.

JC: 'Oh, shit! Wow, okay, extinction-level armageddon kind of event… Okay, great. Yeah, I'm just going to go about my life.' In the book, their world is about to collapse. Is it better or worse than what we're facing? I think I need to reread it.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I remember it being pretty horrible-sounding, but I don't know what it's going to feel like this time. I really don't know.

Lorrie: So you've read this book once?

JC: Once. This will be my second read, first re-read.

Lorrie: Voldemort is just local.

JC: That's true. He doesn't have any kind of global…

Lorrie: Nope.

JC: Yet, I guess. He's just —

Lorrie: He doesn't even dream of going global.

JC: Damn.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, he's not trying to make stupid amounts of money off of this. He's not trying to… Oh, this is depressing.

Lorrie: Yeah. So this is a stymieing intellectual perspective to be entering this book re-read with, and it's so different from how extreme and improbable and fantastical this scenario seemed to me when I read it in 2007 when we were firmly in 'how could people let this happen?' territory.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yes, and the awful thing is that this particular author, the individual, is smack in the middle of it all and is the maniacal, world-controlling oligarch whom we the world know the most intimately because, unlike a lot of other billionaires, she wrote a million words of her own psyche. Nobody can write a million words of a single story without showing their real self.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: We know who she was in the 2000s, and that's not the same as what we have with other billionaires whom we never knew in any other way and didn't come to our attention until they started wanting to obliterate entire nations or whatever.

JC: Yeah. It does say something about how money poisons people, though, doesn't it?

Lorrie: Right. So yes, but anyway, if we go back in time to the original publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* in 2007, the lead-up to the publication of this book was unprecedented. In the history of publishing, the amount of suspense — the international fervor about what was going to be revealed, how this saga was going to end — was headline news for quite a while and the secrecy around publication was so intense; my craving to find out how the story was going to end was just as big as that.

JC: Yeah. I think that was true for all of us. This one, for me, is very poignant because I had been trying to get pregnant for a long time at this point. We had done IVF in June or July of that summer, and within the week that the book was coming out, I was going to find out if I was pregnant or not; my backup plan for if I wasn't pregnant was I had a trip booked to go to London and I was going to be in London with friends for this book drop, and that was my consolation prize. Then I found out a few days before the book came out (I was at another Harry Potter event) and found out that I was in fact pregnant, so I canceled that trip and I picked up the book at my local bookstore and sat at home (by myself, because I think my partner was out of the country at the time) and read it overnight. But yeah, it was this gateway into the next part of my life, reading this book, because it was like, 'Okay, now I'm going to be pregnant, I'm going to be a parent. This is a new phase of my life,' so this book literally ushered in a new phase of my life. Yeah, so that was more than nineteen years ago, and you were also pregnant with your youngest at the same time.

Lorrie: Yes. I was about two or three weeks pregnant and I didn't know it.

JC: Oh…

Lorrie: What I did know was that when I had a raspberry mochaccino to stay awake for the midnight release, I had never gotten so ill off of a raspberry mochaccino before.

JC: Wow, interesting!

Lorrie: I didn't know. 'Why am I feeling so horrible? What's wrong?' Once I realized I was pregnant without knowing it, that made a lot of sense to me. 'Oh… Oh, okay.'

JC: Yeah. We didn't know each other then, but I'm also imagining us on our separate couches in different parts of the country, little embryos growing inside us. That's just kind of wild that that happened at the same time, so this book is definitely tied up in all of that for me. I went to a *Harry Potter* convention a few weeks after this book came out, and at the time I was having to do daily injections of progesterone so that I would not miscarry.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: So I had to take my giant vial and all my needles with me, and the person that I was rooming with was a nurse; these are IM injections, so you have to get them in the butt, and that's really hard to do yourself. Every day at five o'clock, my roommate would be like, "Is it time for your shot?" and wherever I was, I had to pull my pants down a little bit and she'd jab me in the ass with the needle. I was grateful to her for being able to do that. That enabled me to go on this trip: my roommate at that con could give me my shots.

Lorrie: Oi…

JC: But yeah, that was the first con I went to, and then everybody had brought their copy of the book and that was all we… Every panel I went to — even though people had put in proposals six months before or whatever — every panel was just, "Nah, we're just going to talk about the book." Yeah.

Lorrie: So it starts off with this seven-part dedication: she dedicated this book to the readers who were intimately invested in how the story was going to come out, and to me, it felt very much like we're all in this, trying to save Harry together. Saving a single child and getting him to adulthood is the meaning of life; it's the most important thing in the world. Whether you save all of humanity or one person, it's the same thing. That's how it felt, and also, yes, this matters a lot to this author. It felt amazing to me. Usually, nobody cares as much as the author does, of course; in this case, a lot of us did. It really felt like there's a creator making this story and there are story readers receiving it, and we all care together. This is one of the things that we grieve when we miss who the author used to be to us.

JC: I guess that when I think of this book, the world was a very different place, but I remember picking up my copy of the book… I went to BookPeople in downtown Austin where I live — BookPeople is our big, local bookstore — and I remember

watching people grab their book and then just sit down in the parking lot (because we were all outside) and start reading. People in wizard robes and all kinds of costumes just sat down and read; they weren't even going to wait until they got home.

Lorrie: You can't… Yeah, no.

JC: Yeah, and I did. I went home. I went home, I sat on my couch, I started reading then. I got myself a nice herbal tea, I had it all set up. I had a comfy spot, and I was like, 'I'm going to be here all night,' but that feeling of everyone was waiting to read it… Then it's like, 'Don't go online, because there's going to be spoilers…' 'I cannot go online until I have finished reading this book.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: 'I'm not even going to check my email, none of it,' because I was so determined not to be spoiled. Oh, and there's a couple of other things that happened before this book came out. We had the famous carpet book…

Lorrie: Oh, my God, yes…

JC: And then there were some spoilers that were starting to come out. I think someone made a list of all the people and beings who died and posted that somewhere where people were going to trip across it.

Lorrie: Explain what the carpet book was.

JC: The carpet book… This is just two or three days before the release (it was really close to it), but a document appeared online that was a giant — I think it was a PDF, and it was photographs of the book. Someone had set it down on carpet (which is why we call it the carpet book) and flipped through the entire thing, took a photo of every page, and then put that into one giant PDF. There was a lot of 'Is this fake? Is this real?' Looking back, if it had been fake, that would have been an awful lot of work to fake something…

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But people didn't know, right? Someone who had gotten hold of a copy… maybe they worked in a bookstore and snuck one out or whatever and posted it online a few days early. Then there was a lot of discussion online: 'Is it a betrayal

to read it?' Assuming this is the real one, if you read this, are you betraying something? Are you betraying J.K. Rowling? You won't get the experience that you've been waiting for (of going to the bookstore at midnight and being in that community, and then reading it the same time as everybody else), but I knew of people who actually read it that way.

Lorrie: It's just amazing to think that it was the fastest selling book ever. Physically, those books had to be printed and shipped and held in bookstores, waiting for the masses without anything being leaked.

JC: Yeah, and there were photos of the security that bookstores put on these, and you had to pre-order the book; you couldn't just go in and buy it.

Lorrie: It wouldn't be available, yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and the boxes were decorated really beautifully, so there was no mistaking the excitement when those boxes came and could not be touched, could not be secretly opened. It was phenomenal. What did you think as you started?

JC: I think the opening [is] just gradually peeling off these layers, but also giving us lots of really interesting imagery like Snape and Yaxley, we find out, walking to a place we find out is Malfoy Manor, where Voldemort has now set up his headquarters. All of the imagery there… The path they're walking down has wild bramble on the left and neatly manicured yew hedge on the right, and Snape walking down the middle is like, 'Oh, okay, yeah. I see what we're going with there,' that kind of thing; all these descriptions of what they hear, what they see, and then they're having this conversation that we're not told who they're talking about (but we can assume who they're talking about). There's a white peacock there, which I thought, 'Oh…' I had to go look up 'white peacock' because I was like, 'Are these things real?' Okay, yeah, they are real, but one of the things that I thought was interesting was that they're not albino; they actually have a genetic condition that just inhibits melanin from being in their feathers, and that's why their feathers are white. The condition is called 'leucism'…

Lorrie: No!

JC: Which I was like, 'Holy shit! That's kind of cool.'

Lorrie: Oh, wow!

JC: Very interesting! The other thing that I learned about them is that the males really struggle to mate and to be successful in passing on their genes, because even the white female peacocks biologically are still looking for the beautiful, colorful feathers and the white males don't have them, so the white males… It's really hard to get these birds to reproduce because the females don't like the males, and I was like, 'Damn…' This is emasculating Lucius Malfoy to an extent that I'm like, 'Holy shit,' so yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Draco… 'Draco, are you going to be able to pass on the Malfoy everything?'

JC: Right.

Lorrie: I don't know…

JC: And then we have the description of the manor as being… There are all these fountains and beautiful windows…

Lorrie: It's so beautiful.

JC: These markers of gentry, and then we walk in and there are portraits on the walls who are side-eying all the people coming in. I thought, 'Draco grew up in a place that was very much like Hogwarts, and I don't think any other kid did,' so Hogwarts probably felt very different for him than it did for almost anybody else because it wasn't that different from the place he grew up in.

Lorrie: Except who are all these other people running around in the place that should be his?

JC: Right, right. Exactly.

Lorrie: I remember thinking what a relief it was that we get Snape right away, because during the two-year hiatus, the hysteria around 'What are we going to get with this Snape character?' was mounting, and I was smack in the middle of Snape fandom, so for me, it was the big question. 'Oh, thank goodness, we get him right away.' He hasn't been apprehended, because one of the questions was, 'If you kill Albus Dumbledore, are they going to track you down and kill you? Are they going

to throw you in jail?' No. We don't know how the rest of the world sees what he did to Dumbledore, but he's still out and about.

JC: Right, and this is about a month after the end of the last book.

Lorrie: I guess it's about a month, yeah.

JC: Yeah, okay.

Lorrie: And this Death Eater that didn't get a name in the last book is now named, so all right, the Death Eaters are now more important as individuals; that's a change, a shift in this world order. And then… Ugh, God, this is something that I cannot read the same way in 2026 as I did in 2007: as Yaxley and Snape are trying to get admission into the Malfoy Manor grounds, "…both raised their left arms in a kind of salute…"

JC: Yes. Yes, yes, yes. That stood out to me, too.

Lorrie: So at the time of 2007, Godwin's Law was still in effect.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: It was still considered, internationally, to make you a pariah if you believed in Nazi anything; that was considered by the mainstream to be unthinkable (evil, off-limits) and this was seen as shocking. 'Oh, these evil people are doing a salute.' Fast forward to the past ten years of degradation of U.S. society, to now having it be a core, central tenet of the U.S. government. A degree of degradation… This is one of the elements that reads as most sorrowfully naive in this chapter because it's not considered a shocking taboo break right now; we have to see it openly, and this brings up Elon Musk, who was introducing this kind of salute at the beginning of this administration of Trump's presidency. Elon Musk is completely inextricable now, in my mind, from J.K. Rowling because the two of them are so public in their crusade against trans rights and the ability of trans people to live publicly (Musk, because one of his children is trans; Rowling, because as far as we can tell from her 2020 manifesto, she probably has unresolved, personal feelings about being somewhat trans herself and wanting to deny it). Whatever it is, whatever is causing them to make this their outsized campaign, they're together, and this is not an alliance that I thought would have been likely a few years ago. This is a change in Rowling, and that's not something

that I can separate from my reading of this text that was written in 2007 when Rowling of that time and that decade was using this left-arm salute as an indicator of evil. She and Elon Musk, even a couple years ago, teamed up to somehow be transphobic against an Olympic boxer who is cis.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: This is a stage of naivete that the *Harry Potter* fandom had to abandon a few years ago. You would think that having to be allies with Elon Musk would be a clear indicator to you that you were off the rails and were siding with the wrong people, but no. No, we don't get surprised now when that's where Rowling shows up. I'm sorry, this is just depressing.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, the Nazi salute to get through the gates is… Yeah, and it does bring up a lot of different things now than it did then. It felt a little heavy-handed then — a little too on the nose — and now, it's like, 'No, no… Oh, yeah, that's how it would be. Right.'

Lorrie: No, they all belong to the same little club. Malfoy Manor is at the height of its elegance. It's so elegant, it's so powerful; it's such an institution, and it's so not new money. There's nothing tacky about it.

JC: Nothing is gold-plated, is what I want to say.

Lorrie: Right, and "the room's usual furniture had been pushed carelessly up against the walls." As Snape and Yaxley walk in, the big drawing room has been converted into a conference room. They have magic; they didn't have to be careless about shoving the furniture around, but that's obviously part of the message. Malfoy Manor is still in a state of undisturbed innocence, comparatively; here in the U.S., our White House no longer has an East Wing, the Rose Garden has been paved over, there are cage matches on the lawn… Malfoy Manor is in really, really, really good shape compared to that.

JC: This is true.

Lorrie: And the centerpiece revolving over the conference table — something so awful that not even Death Eaters can bring themselves to look at it — is an unconscious, upside-down, revolving human woman.

JC: The sentence paraphrased roughly is that no one was really looking at it except for a "pale young man" who kept looking up, and I'm like, 'Okay, yeah, that's Draco.' He's the only one who's looking up at this Hogwarts teacher who is being held captive in his own home.

Lorrie: Yeah, and he's defined as a young man; he has lost the protection of childhood. Charity Burbage is the name of this professor, this teacher at Hogwarts.

JC: And we've never —

Lorrie: Never heard of her.

JC: Does that name ever come up before?

Lorrie: Nope.

JC: Okay, yeah.

Lorrie: Snape comes in, sees this scenario of this conference table with everybody not looking at this horrific vision…

JC: A colleague of his.

Lorrie: And Voldemort says, "Ah, come sit on my right side, Severus."

JC: "And be my right-hand man..."

Lorrie: Right.

JC: The song from *Hamilton*.

Lorrie: All of Dumbledore's and Snape's scheming to get Snape into Voldemort's trust have all paid off, and we get indications throughout this chapter about how much envy and jockeying for position there is among Death Eaters, which is the way Voldemort likes it, but Snape right now is secure.

JC: Yeah. He's the right-hand man.

Lorrie: Yeah, they all hate him. So no, we have never seen Charity Burbage before; her name brings us back to *The Prince* by Machiavelli and what the name “Charity” tells us. The quote from The Prince goes: "One must understand this: a prince" — by which he means a politician, a leader — "and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are considered good, because

in order to maintain the state he must often act against his faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion." This is telling us Snape's position: if he is going to stay in this fight — in order to do anything at all — he has to not be a good person. He has to be prepared to not be a good person. We readers might think, 'How can you be good by not being good? Is that even excusable ever?' Charity Burbage, in this case, is your example of what happens when you go without that kind of guile, what happens to you under this kind of extreme regime. Machiavelli says, "For there is such a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation." Snape, the Half-Blood Prince, has to find a way to try to survive long enough to fight this somehow, and that way has to be abandoning what's good and what's charitable.

JC: And at this point, he is aware that he's the only person who knows what needs to be done, right? He's the only person that Dumbledore told the truth to at this point, yeah.

Lorrie: Yes. We, the reader, are being shown the position that Snape is operating from, and the name Charity Burbage is a clue to say, "Look back at Machiavelli. Look at *The Prince*." This is what Snape and Dumbledore were scheming for all this time to get him in position to do: to get him in as Voldemort's right-hand man and then to act in a way that doesn't upset that position. That's his only chance at maintaining this state, at saving anything of this world: he does have to act against charity. The final clue that we get from this chapter about what Snape is really feeling: when Charity Burbage is revived and she becomes conscious again, she looks at Snape and she says those words (that are probably his least favorite words ever) that Dumbledore said to him: "Severus, please…" When those words are said to Snape, he's being tested. Anyway, that's her name, and then Burbage… That's one of Rowling's names that's almost comical; to me, it feels very Hufflepuff…

JC: Oh, interesting.

Lorrie: Kind of sweet and guileless and humble, and really in line with the kind of sincere person who would speak directly (not in a calculated way) and just say directly what should be good — what would prove love, as Chuck Tingle says — what would be kind, what would make this world a benevolent place to be, and the kind of trouble that'll get you right into if this is the regime.

JC: I did wonder on the first read — and I'm wondering it again now — why the person who gets murdered in this chapter is someone we don't know. That was a choice. Not that it was the Muggle Studies — that makes a lot of sense — but why was the choice of victim someone that we had never met before, someone who's a stranger to us? Is that keeping it from being too painful at the start? There are other people, other Hogwarts teachers that we know, who could have been in this position.

Lorrie: I guess for me as a reader, the function it serves is to show me that this choice of victim is about Snape. If it were somebody that we had met before, then that would bring in an enormous amount of emotional baggage.

JC: Ah.

Lorrie: Obviously, Voldemort is staging this in order to set the tone, inarguably, to terrorize his Death Eaters, and we're supposed to focus on what this means for Snape and only Snape as readers. If it were Professor Sprout… This person, Charity Burbage, seems to me the closest in personality to Professor Sprout, but if it were Sprout, a whole bunch of associations would cascade in my feelings as a reader.

JC: Okay. One other thing that stood out to me here that would not have hit me before — and it's hit me before, but I don't think I brought it up before: Voldemort's voice is always described in these books as being "high and clear," and it hit me really hard this time that that is not a very masculine description and I can't help but read that in a particular way from knowing this author now, right? It reads differently to me now.

Lorrie: Ugh…

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Then we see the jockeying for position that Voldemort enjoys encouraging among his Death Eaters. Snape comes with information (he says that Harry is going to be moved at a specific time and day) and Yaxley says, "Well, no, that's not the information I have." Snape is completely confident that his version is true, and Yaxley is very unhappy about this because this was going to be his big play for more credit with the Dark Lord. Yaxley's sources were really solid; he really should

have had the credit for this, but no. When Snape says, "Okay, Harry's going to be moved at nightfall on Saturday," then Voldemort tests him, and this is so intense because at the end of *Half-Blood Prince*, we saw how helpless Harry was when Snape just went in there and Legilimized him and Harry had not a single defense. It's terrifying, and yet Voldemort does this to Snape and Snape is without fear. He's really got everything covered. "[Voldemort's] red eyes fastened upon Snape's black ones with such intensity that some of the watchers looked away, apparently fearful that they themselves would be scorched by the ferocity of the gaze. Snape, however, looked calmly back into Voldemort's face…" He just presents his mind, Voldemort just goes right in there, looks in every corner, and then Voldemort is happy and satisfied and Snape is completely calm. I love him, I am so proud of him, I'm so impressed with him!

JC: Yeah. That's really intense, especially considering all the Legilimency lessons and everything. Here, this is exactly how Snape has been able to fool Voldemort this entire time, and just to see it so masterfully done… Voldemort has no idea. Damn…

Lorrie: Snape wins that competition; Yaxley loses.

JC: We learn through that that Yaxley has the Head of Magical Law Enforcement under Imperius Curses, and what Voldemort wants is for everyone surrounding the Minister of Magic to be under their control, right? I could not help but think this is the state of the U.S. government right now. We have this figurehead (this president) who has initiated all this chaos, but right now, it's a little unclear who's actually running the show. This guy is kind of, by all reports, not all there anymore.

Lorrie: He's fraying, yeah.

JC: Right, really fraying. He does the thing where he always loves to have people around him jockey for position in this exact same way; he loves that chaos and he wants to see who wins. Who's going to kiss his ass the most and who's going to win, right? That was really familiar to me in a way that it would not have been twenty years ago.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But also, just the idea [that] we are controlling everyone around this one figurehead who is going to end up being our puppet… That also made me kind of go, 'Ugh.'

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: I think for a long time, a lot of us thought, 'Well, once Trump's out of power or incapacitated or whatever, things will maybe be fixed,' and now it's like, 'No, I don't believe that anymore.'

Lorrie: Yaxley says proudly, "I have — with difficulty and after great effort — succeeded in placing an Imperius Curse on Pius Thicknesse." There's the most heavy-handed of Rowling's names, and Yaxley would really like to get at least a little credit for this.

JC: "Look how hard I worked! It was so hard!"

Lorrie: It really was a big get. At the time, that read to me like, 'Yes, yes, that's what you would have to do,' and now it feels really naive to me. I used to think that you would have to do something to get people to fall in line, and I have seen since, in the past few years, no, actually, there's nothing like that; they can just be greedy and do it on their own.

JC: Yeah. It's really easy to get somebody to switch their party and go to another party's convention. Sorry, I'm talking about current events as if people know what's happening.

Lorrie: Two of the biggest lackeys in Trump's administration are Vice President J.D. Vance and his Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Anybody can go back just a few years and find what these people said about Trump before they became key players, and now, I don't know. Are they broken? Are they happy about this? What did it take? Not as much as we might have thought. Was the Imperius Curse really necessary? Apparently not, but that was the sweetly naive viewpoint of 2007 me reading this: 'Oh, yes, of course.'

JC: 'Of course, it would take an Imperius Curse.'

Hosts: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, no, not so much.

Lorrie: Yaxley says that they (Voldemort's people) have infiltrated the Department of Magical Transport, so anyone who Apparates or uses the Floo Network will be immediately tracked. Snape says, "No, Harry Potter's not going to do either of those things." Snape says, "The Order is eschewing any form of transport that is controlled or regulated by the Ministry; they mistrust everything to do with the place." That feels very current to me, not more naive as, 'Okay, trust in government has been broken.' There was a time when I would encounter people saying, 'Oh, come on. There are some people who'll be safe, right?' And I'm starting to see people think 'no'. If they're going to, for example, tamper with mail-in voting, they're not going to say, "Oh, you're white enough, so we're going to mail in your vote." No, no, they don't care.

JC: Yeah, yeah.

Lorrie: Based on Snape's information, Voldemort says, "Okay, well, Harry Potter will have to move out in the open. Great, that makes it better for me," and then he shows where his thinking is currently: "I shall attend to the boy in person. There have been too many mistakes where Harry Potter is concerned. Some of them have been my own. That Potter lives is more due to my errors, than to his triumphs."

JC: Can you imagine a leader admitting fault and saying, "Oh, that was my mistake"? Goddamn… How many years has it been since we've had a president who'd've…?

Lorrie: It's so funny. Everything about this statement from Voldemort is hilarious to me. Voldemort being introspective…

JC: Saying, "Mistakes were made…"

Lorrie: I know. "It was me."

JC: "The buck stops here. I will fix it. I will take responsibility." Holy shit, Voldemort. Can you come to the United States?

Lorrie: "Look it, look it, I'm capable of personal growth." It also shows, though, that this is his limitation; he cannot imagine that Harry survived because of anything superior about Harry.

JC: Ah, that's interesting.

Lorrie: It had to have been him.

JC: Yeah. That's interesting.

Lorrie: That's something that Snape sees and can use. His feeling that "Potter lives due more to my errors than to his triumphs…" Great. Keep having him think that. Voldemort thinks he's found something, some new answer: "I understand those things that I did not understand before. I must be the one to kill Harry Potter, and I shall be." Okay, we don't know what he thinks he's found yet, but if only these Death Eaters could hear this and realize that really, honestly, nobody should try to kill Harry except Voldemort… The way that they keep not getting that point, I just shake my head. Aye… But once Voldemort says confidently that he's going to be the one to kill Harry Potter: "At these words, seemingly in response to them, a sudden wail sounded, a terrible, drawn-out cry of misery and pain. Many of those at the table looked downward, startled, for the sound had seemed to issue from below their feet." What? What the heck?! I remember being so confused because I had assumed that this was Charity Burbage making that sound. It's not… Charity Burbage is above; this is coming from below. All right, he's got everything covered, huh? We don't find out in this chapter who that is…

JC: And I don't remember. I was like, 'I don't know who this is,' but Voldemort sends Wormtail to "keep our prisoner quiet," and Wormtail scurries away with his silver hand.

Lorrie: Yeah. So yeah, there are creepy things happening, whether you're aware of it or not; once in a while, there'll be evidence about it. Then it's Lucius Malfoy's turn to be under the spotlight. Oh, boy… Voldemort says one of the things he has learned is that he now has to borrow a wand from somebody else, and you can just see how much fun he's having as he gears up to corner Lucius and make him the laughingstock of this next bit. I really am not a big movie person, but Jason Isaacs as Lucius Malfoy, to me, is more Lucius than Lucius on the page.

JC: Yeah. Yeah, I was thinking of that scene. The dialogue in this that's written is, word for word, the way that it was in the film, as far as I remember, and Jason Isaacs's face and his delivery was all that was in my head when I was reading it.

Lorrie: Once in a while, you watch a movie and you think this actor is having the time of their life. Oh, you just know it brought Jason Isaacs so much joy to portray

the greatest of wealthy men humbled to his worst downfall and how wrecked he would look — beautifully wrecked. "Lucius Malfoy looked up. His skin appeared yellowish and waxy in the firelight and his eyes were sunken and shadowed." Much to his chagrin, Lucius Malfoy has been sprung from Azkaban by Voldemort. Oh, great.

JC: Out of the frying pan into the fire.

Lorrie: So he is a destroyed man, and whenever Voldemort is in a low mood, he can just go punch Lucius Malfoy a bit and make himself feel way better. We get the dynamic that's going to save the Malfoys: we get the wordless communication between Lucius and Narcissa, and that's how they're going to get through. That's how they're going to make it through.

JC: The most functional marriage in the entire series, I think, in some ways.

Lorrie: Yeah. Voldemort starts picking on Lucius and Lucius very quickly glances at Narcissa, who won't look at him, but she touches his wrist; that's his signal from her. 'Yeah, go ahead. Do what he says. I'm with you.' I actually find personal strength from the way that Narcissa keeps the family together during this volume.

JC: Oh, yeah, yeah. She's this character that I weirdly have some affection for.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: She's a Death Eater (kind of), but also she's just… I don't know. She holds her family together, she saves her son and saves Harry in the process… She does, maybe, the right thing for the wrong reasons, but she's just… Yeah, I like her a lot. I like her strength that she's portrayed with, and I like the fact that she's the one who's kind of pulling the strings. Both her husband and her son are falling apart, and she's like, 'All right…'

Lorrie: 'I know what to do.'

JC: 'I'm in charge now. I know what to do. Listen to me.' It's like, ooh, yeah. In the movie, at the very end, she's clearly the one who just picks up her husband and son. I don't think that happens in the book, but there's this great scene where she picks them both up and she's like, "Let's go. Come on, boys. We're out of here."

Lorrie: What surprises me about Narcissa here… I would have expected her to be angry at Lucius because he got them into this, but she's not. That points to me to a genuine connection between them where she actually likes him and knew that being with him might mean that they would be in this terrible position they're in now, but they are so together. I would have been so angry at him, but she's not. This feels more like she wants to comfort him and hearten him at the same time. "… beneath the table her slim fingers closed briefly on his wrist." That feels to me like, 'I'm with you. I love you.' It's comforting. It's not like, 'You fool, just do what I say.' If she were angry with him, she might just at this point not give him reassurance and just, 'You're on your own. You got yourself into this; you figure a way out.' This is more like, 'I'm here. I'm still with you.'

JC: The contrast that I'm seeing in my brain, too, now is the way that Melania Trump treats her husband with the disgust on her face when she's near him, yeah. Then we get this great little scene where Voldemort emasculates Lucius Malfoy publicly by taking his wand…

Lorrie: And takes out his own and compares the lengths.

JC: Yeah, exactly. Literal dick measuring contest happening right here in the book.

Lorrie: Yeah. We're being very essentialist here. Voldemort gleefully names Lucius as the one who's going to have to hand over the wand. Lucius walks right into his setup and makes Voldemort the happiest little villain alive by making an involuntary movement betraying the fact that he, for a moment, thought that maybe Voldemort was going to trade wands with him and give him his own, so you can feel Voldemort's insides singing with joy as he ridicules Lucius for that. Then Voldemort gets to taunt the Malfoys and just draw it out as long as possible, asking why they're "so unhappy about my presence in your home," and of course, the Malfoys have to be like, "No, no, we're really thrilled to have you, my Lord."

JC: "It's an honor, sir."

Lorrie: Now that he's had that fun, enter Nagini. Draco is terrified to make eye contact; he still can't take his eyes off of Charity Burbage. Now Bellatrix speaks up; Bellatrix, who is totally in the cult of personality. What did you think of?

JC: I thought of that woman, that young woman, who is Trump's new assistant who apparently, I don't know, wipes his ass or whatever. "My Lord…"

Lorrie: The New York Times calls Natalie Harp "Trump's binky."

JC: Oh, my God.

Lorrie: I've also seen her referred to as Trump's hospice nurse. She, I know, was at first portrayed as the latest mistress, but he's so clearly beyond that.

JC: It's so clear that it's not that.

Lorrie: Unfortunately for the world, we got the leak of some personal correspondence that she wrote to him, which is so similar to Bellatrix's mindset.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Cultish devotion, and the powerful person who's cultivating this uses that to jeer. You would think that Voldemort would be appreciative of Bellatrix's devotion; no, he sets her up so cruelly for everybody there to laugh at her. He uses against her that her niece Tonks married a werewolf, Remus, and the craven way that all of these jerky Death Eaters immediately are thrilled to just now mock Bellatrix… God, these people… Ew.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Why would anyone want to be with these people? Oh, my goodness…

JC: And you get the sense that this is what it was like before, too. Maybe it's worse now, but before when Voldemort was in power, and why all those Death Eaters were secretly glad that it was over and they could pretend they had been Imperiused the whole time and just go back to their lives. "I got myself in over my head. God, that's over," and then they weren't anxious to go to the Dark Lord when they sensed he was coming back. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. If you can picture how gleefully they were at the Quidditch World Cup doing only the parts that they wanted…

JC: Yeah, with the tiki torches.

Lorrie: Yeah, in their bed sheets.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And then somebody casts the real Dark Mark, and they're all terrified and they all scatter. 'Oh, shit…' When Voldemort has his fun jeering at Bellatrix and making fun of her for having a relative who married a werewolf, he does that dehumanization thing (that eugenics thing) where he says to Draco, "Will you babysit the cubs?" He sets up the whole mandate for his followers to exterminate people and he tells Bellatrix that she's going to have to prune her family tree, and she would never dream of letting him down; that's her new mission. He uses the fascist language and says, "We shall cut away the canker that infects us until only those of the true blood remain," which, as always, makes zero sense. 'True blood… What? You half-blood, what are you talking about?' That's, I guess, a big part of the game: to make people show that they're going to fall in line, even though it makes no sense.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yuck.

JC: We've seen a lot of that.

Lorrie: The whole weirdness of demonizing immigrants when your whole family is immigrants…

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Weird.

JC: Yeah, and we also see, again, Narcissa being the one who's directing how her family should respond to this. Yeah. They look to her and then she gives them a little signal, and that's how they respond.

Lorrie: 'Just take it. Just let the moment pass.' So at this point, Voldemort revives Charity Burbage, who is terrified and weeping, and Draco denies knowing her, which cannot possibly be true. This is…Goddamn, is this depressing... Voldemort explains why she's been singled out: "Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles… how they are not so different from us…" Which angle should we talk about first: the attack on academia, or the 'don't say gay' angle?

JC: There's just so many angles from which you could come at this, for sure. I live in Texas and our universities are under attack, and it just keeps getting worse all the time. Entire programs are eliminated; the university I'm at, we no longer have things like women's studies or gender studies or African-American studies, Hispanic studies, none of it — Indigenous Studies, all gone — and then the university's core has been rewritten to take out anything that does not primarily focus on a white, western perspective. That's where I'm at, and this was all very familiar to me. 'Oh, yeah, yeah. Of course, they're going to get rid of Muggle studies — yeah, all that stuff — because that's not what witches and wizards really need to know, right?' Yeah. 'We don't want anyone to center anyone else's perspective but our own.' That's so familiar. That's my life right now.

Lorrie: Yeah. It also reminded me of TERFpocalypse in 2020 when one of the things that Rowling was so offended by was the phrase "people who menstruate," which is saying that people who aren't women who have periods should be considered when menstruation is the issue, the same as people who identify as women who menstruate.

JC: Right, right.

Lorrie: Why is that offensive?

JC: Yeah, right.

Lorrie: But if you are teaching that we should be aware that menstruation affects people who aren't women, then somehow that is the foundation of an entire campaign that is now six years into its rampage?

JC: Another thing that this whole scene made me think about is the fact that Charity Burbage was picked out and sacrificed as the worst example of someone who thinks that Muggles and witches and wizards should be equal or whatever. It makes me think… There were multiple faculty in Texas who were videotaped and edited — something they said was edited and it went viral online —and in the end, they were fired from their jobs; at least, in one case, the president of the university ended up resigning over protesting this. I just thought, yeah, we've also had our Charity Burbages; they didn't die, but their careers were ruined. They were publicly humiliated in ways that had incredibly negative effect on them personally and professionally.

Lorrie: And in journalism internationally, there have been journalists who have actually died, because that's what Burbage did. It's not only that she was a teacher; it's that she wrote something in a newspaper (she wrote an op-ed piece), so journalism is what triggered this execution on her. What this is saying, in terms of how this opening chapter sets the tone for this volume, is direct advocacy is now fatally dangerous. If you are somebody like Charity Burbage who just states the truth openly, plainly — without subterfuge, without allegory — this is what you're up against.

JC: And that feels very real to me in our world right now. Yeah.

Lorrie: So this is a time when going underground is a survival tactic where speaking allegorically or finding alternate ways to get information out… That's how you're going to have to do it. There are people who are going to want to just speak out directly as she did — and it's super valuable and people must do it, and it's very heartening when people do it — but you have to know that this is the risk. She was playing by rules from before Voldemort came to this much power where, in her world, there was still a First Amendment. Charity Burbage is being sacrificed; she faces Snape, begging him to save her. "Tears were pouring from her eyes into her hair" because she's been dangling from mid-air. "Snape looked back at her, quite impassive…" How does that strike you about Snape? I'm speaking firmly from my love of that character, so I know how that affected me. How do you feel when you read that?

JC: They're trying to execute people they don't like, and that Snape has to go along with this because he's got a plan. I'm assuming at that point that he had a plan, so I kind of see it now: the impassive just feels like a mask, I guess. Who knows what's happening on the inside, but he can't let anything show. He can't look like he's gleefully appreciating it; he can't look like he's not sure this is the right thing to do or whatever, right? It's just completely… 'I'm a statue here, and I'm not going to let anything show.' He's not sneering. I guess, maybe that's the thing, right? He's not the typical Snape face that Harry would often see. When Snape was happy about something, we're not seeing that; we're seeing nothing, a mask of nothing.

Lorrie: So as a reader, you feel like you don't know what's behind that, but you're sure something is.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Looking back, I can guess what's behind it, but at the time, certainly, it felt like he's hiding whatever's going on on the inside and hiding it pretty well.

Lorrie: There definitely is a long tradition in literature of people where it looks like there's something going on on the inside, and you find out that no, actually, there isn't. That's part of the mystery: no, they've turned it off or they don't actually feel it that much. That's not how this author writes her characters. When it looks like something's going on on the inside, something is, and that goes extra for this particular one. I know that there are people who can't stand the character of Snape where this just disgusts them. 'Wow, how unfeeling of him. What is wrong with him that he can just sit there when something like this happens and not show any feeling?' Even people who are predisposed to see this character this way… I think that everyone has to see that all the people present in this room at this moment have to do their best to survive this without showing anything, and it really broke my heart. He's going to have to show how much that must tear him up on the inside that this colleague is personally begging him to do something, and he can't show the slightest human connection toward her. What can he do but just let this happen? For me as a Snape fan, that was a hard thing for me to read, thinking what that was going to do to him on the inside.

JC: That's only the beginning of the awful shit he's going to have to endure this year. This is nothing compared to what's coming.

Lorrie: On the other hand, we don't know it yet but after this, we're not going to see him again for five hundred pages.

JC: Yeah. He's in an alternate book, where all the shit he has to deal with is described in detail.

Lorrie: This opening chapter gave me a false sense of security that I was going to get a lot more Snape than I ended up getting in this book.

JC: Ah, I see.

Lorrie: At the beginning, it's like, 'Oh, good, we get Snape right away. That is, in fact, what I was curious about the whole time.' No, we don't actually get very much Snape. This is it for a long time. After Voldemort enjoys Charity Burbage begging

for her life, he decides it's time he kills her; she crashes onto the table that is the centerpiece of everything. All the Death Eaters jump out of their skins; Draco falls out of his chair onto the floor. Geez… Mercifully, we the readers don't have to see what comes next, but Voldemort has Nagini eat Charity Burbage in front of all his Death Eaters, and you know that they were not allowed to move until Nagini was done.

JC: Until she slithered away with this giant, person-sized lump.

Lorrie: Oh, my goodness, to sleep for who knows how long. Charity Burbage must have tasted delicious... Any tone that Voldemort wanted to set with his followers at this meeting, it's gone exactly the way he might have hoped. This was a great, great meeting for Voldemort.

JC: Yeah. This is Voldemort in his element.

Hosts: Yeah.

Lorrie: There's no Harry in this chapter.

JC: But if memory serves, we get Harry right away after this chapter.

Lorrie: Yes, we do. But yeah, this chapter has established very much the setting of the world that we're in now.

JC: Yeah, yeah. It could be worse…

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And it's going to get worse, but yeah, right now, I'm like, 'Oh…'

Lorrie: 'Eh…' The next chapter is called In Memoriam.

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