Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Wrap-Up: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone

Vanessa: *Intro Music Begins*

“‘Oh, I will,” said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that was spreading over his face. ‘They don’t know we’re not allowed to use magic at home. I’m going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer…”

Vanessa: I’m Vanessa Zoltan.

Casper: And I’m Casper ter Kuile.

Vanessa: And this is *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*.

(Intro music fades)

Vanessa: Casper, it has been so much fun doing the first season of this podcast together and in reflecting back on how far we’ve come in the last year, working on this project together, I was reminded of something that we said to ourselves very early on when we were planning the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* class. We spent a lot of effort planning and we got really nervous that no one would come, and you said to me, “well we need to promise ourselves that even if no one comes, we will still sit in the middle of that room and do this practice together.” And what a gift that so many people have joined us in this conversation, because as much fun as it would have been just the two of us, I think one of the greatest gifts in last year was all of the people who’ve become part of this conversation.

Casper: I feel like we get to be better at what we do because of all the suggestions that people offer and the voicemails and emails and on social media, and it’s wonderful to know that so many folks are reading along with us. So I’m really grateful that we’ve already finished book one and are soon moving on to book two, *The Chamber of Secrets*, which is in my top three of the books.

Vanessa: I’m mostly excited because if it had just been the two of us, no one would have known how much better I was at 30 Second Recaps, and that’s one of the real gifts of being part of a community is everybody can see my superiority.

Casper: Who won?

Vanessa: The tally was 247 votes for me and a completely respectable 203 votes for you. And now I regret all the trash talk.

Casper: I mean it’s validated, you one, but, I, more than 200. I don’t know who’s voting but #TeamCasper.
Vanessa: You do know who’s voting…

Casper: Okay it’s mostly me.

Vanessa: Let’s be honest.

Casper: So this week because we’ve finished reading the whole of book one, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone/Philosopher’s Stone*, we’re going to do a 30 Second Recap of the entire book, and then we’re going to draw out some particular themes and characters that we want to bring into the conversation. So Vanessa are you ready to time me?

Vanessa: Good luck. Good effort. Ready?

Casper: I’m so ready. I’m like adrenalin.

Vanessa: On your mark, get set, go.

(*Ticking noise*)

Casper: Little boy called Harry Potter is born, scar on his forehead. Horrible parents, I mean not parents, parents dead. Aunt and Uncle are horrible and he goes on a train, meets Hagrid. He’s a wizard yay! Tasty sweets, arrives, beautiful scenery, adventures, adventures, Halloween, troll escape, Hermione new friend, Christmas holidays, adventure, Nicholas Flamel, oh Philosopher’s Stone, trapped door, three-headed dog, challenge, man in the mirror, mirror gives stone, Harry free, yaaaaaaay.

(*Buzzing noise—72 words in 30 seconds!*)

Casper: Okay that was rough.

Vanessa: You went back to your dada strategy.

Casper: No, I thought this was more like a timeline. It’s like a surrealist timeline.

Vanessa: I’m either going to do this in five seconds or four minutes. I don’t know how I’m going to do this in thirty seconds.

Casper: 3, 2, 1.

(*Ticking noise*)
Vanessa: So there’s an orphan child named Harry Potter and he lives with his mean aunt and uncle and then it turns out that he’s a wizard so he goes away to this wizard boarding school. And he makes some friends for the first time and we meet Hermione Granger and that’s amazing. And then he’s super nosey so he gets pulled into this big adventure but then it turns out that this big adventure is actually about the most evil man in the entire world, Voldemort, who killed Harry’s parents. And so Harry has to struggle with Voldemort at the end of the school year, and he beats this man Quirrell which means he’s beats Voldemort, at least holds him off for a little while.

(Buzzing noise—125 words in 30 seconds!)

Casper: Yeah but what about Fluffy?

Vanessa: Oh shoot, yeah you’re right, I didn’t bring up Fluffy. I guess I lose, I guess I lose.

Casper: I think it’s better that people don’t have a chance to vote for me this week. Let’s move on to something that I’m better at, which is taking the long view of the books. So we finished the whole book, let’s explore a couple of things in detail. And I want to start with Harry because even though he’s the titular character of the book we haven’t really talked about him that much. And so I want to think about what transformation that Harry goes through from the opening pages to the closing pages of book one. What strikes you as the biggest change that we see in Harry?

Vanessa: It’s such a great question. This is the book in which Harry changes the most, and he changes the most just upon the news that he’s a wizard, right? He has gone from being a boy who is stuck in this house where people hate him to being a boy who is loved and has magical powers and has this history. So the biggest change that Harry’s going to go through, I would argue I don’t know if you would agree, but in all seven books is when Hagrid comes and gives him all the information.

Casper: I think you’re right, it’s a huge identify shift, but I do think that this is also a gradual process for Harry, it takes him time to really inhabit that identity and we see that with his growing love for Quidditch and that’s another real moment where he feels like he belongs. And the moment where Ron and Hermione say, “well of course we’re going with you through the trapped door,” he really understands that these are friends forever. So I do think that there is a gradual nature that we see throughout the books, but certainly he returns to the Dursleys’ saying, “haha they don’t know that I’m not allowed to use magic.” He is coming back with power and agency and a sense of self, which was nearly entirely absent from those opening pages of the book.

Vanessa: I think if we’re taking a long view of Harry, what I’m realizing looking back is that we’re really watching Harry in this book learn what it is like to feel love, and to feel as though he is loved.
Casper: And it’s certainly not something Harry completes in this book, I think there is a fundamental tension for Harry throughout the story of this great self-sufficiency that he has in spades, in which he had in the opening pages of the book, surviving with the Dursleys and making the most of a really difficult situation, and learning to be loved as you say and learning to depend and trust on others. And he’s made progress in book one but there’s still work to do. And we can see that in moments of stress or challenge that he does revert to that, “well I’ll do it myself, I can’t depend on others or I don’t want to put anyone else at risk,” so that’ll be something interesting to track as we go forward. Thinking about how Harry changes in this book, I’m thinking about how his scar becomes more important in this book, we really learn that it’s connected to the dreams he has and the pain he experiences when he comes face-to-face with Voldemort. And it seems like this has something to say about his growing vulnerability, which is ironic because he’s in a place where he’s training, he’s learning about magic, and he’s becoming physically stronger; but the scar, it’s a wound in a way, which keeps opening and I’m just really struck by that as a metaphor that as we grow up we become more vulnerable. Does that strike something that resonates?

Vanessa: Yeah it really does. On a very personal level I think mostly the way that we talk about it now is we call it, “baggage,” the longer that you’re alive the more sensitive points you have. I always think about it terms of if you get a shot in your upper arm, you don’t realize how often people touch your upper arm until it’s sensitive and then you’re like, “ow people touch that all the time.” And the longer we’re alive the more sensitive points we get. And so the more it hurts to walk through the world, there’s strength in that, you can withstand more but the potential for pain is much higher. And so it makes complete sense to me that his scar becomes more and more painful as his baggage accumulates. The thing that strikes me about the scar, although I don’t know a lot about the religious traditions behind it, is that it’s a place where we see a lot of religious presentations on the body. On Ash Wednesday we see people walking around with ashes on their forehead. Or it’s where, in Hinduism, we see people representing the Third Eye. So the middle of the forehead, it’s a place where a parent will kiss a child right on their forehead so I wonder if it’s something we consider a place of vulnerability and a place of sacredness. And I don’t know if that’s because it’s the front of the brain or if it’s just because your forehead is a large, blank canvas on your face, or what it is, but it seems like a place of reverence and a place where we often offer blessings.

Casper: Gosh, I hadn’t thought about that Vanessa and it’s so true, especially as that’s what Harry walks around the world with so visibly. He has his hair kind of hiding it, but it’s right face-on, it’s how he engages the world is with that scar shining out. So it’s something with which he’s marked by and he can’t really hide that. I hadn’t thought about the scar like that before that’s a really…I really like that. Vanessa, who do you want to bring our attention to as we take this longer view?

Vanessa: A unit I’m interested in looking more closely at is Fred and George Weasley. I think I always just thought of them as comic relief, and they are, they’re hilarious, but now I look at them and see a real force for love and joy. For example, in the Quidditch chapter, when it
occurs to them that Harry’s in danger they’re goal is to save Harry, not to win the Quidditch match, and they are the ones who are the most loving and appreciative of the sweaters that Molly Weasley makes. So they just seem like characters who we think of as always joking and as jokesters, but they’re so much more, they’re the embodiment of joyful love.

Casper: You’re so right, for me they’ve always kind of been in the background, but the way you’re talking about them makes me realize that maybe because they’re twins and maybe because they are forced together from the beginning that they don’t develop that self-reliance that Harry has so much of. But that they are practicing love and generosity and friendship, even, throughout their childhood so that even now when they’re just a couple of years older than Harry, they’re able to think of how to appreciate other people or even to be courageous in ways that Ron and Hermione and Harry are still learning. They’ve already broken all the rules that Harry and Ron and Hermione are just learning to break now, and when Harry, Ron and Hermione lose so many points so quickly, the text even tells us that, “even Fred and George had never lost that many points.” They seem to know where the line is of what one should be allowed to do, and what’s just beyond the line that’s still okay.

Vanessa: And I feel like they just get better and better at that as the books go on.

Casper: And especially, as we’ll find, they know when it’s really time to call quits when they leave Hogwarts before they graduate, which is such a radical act.

Vanessa: But the really important question here Casper is now that we’ve had this conversation, will you admit that the Weasley twins are sexier than Oliver Wood?

Casper: Oh no, Oliver Wood is just, you know maybe this is where the movies have ruined it for me, they’re just too geeky looking. I love the geeks but I want a strapping Quidditch Player for my man.

Vanessa: Is there anything else you want to take a long view of before we move on?

Casper: So I know you’re going to make fun of me for this, but I want to talk about meals. Because when we start, we’re at the Dursleys, right? We know that Harry is hardly ever fed, he’s probably malnourished, and we arrive in this magical world and the first thing Hagrid does is bring Harry’s birthday cake and he’s making these sausages. So food is there from the very beginning of Harry’s entry into the magical world and then once we arrive at Hogwarts the feasts, the different celebrations around Halloween, Christmas, and then the final feast at the end of the year; food plays such a celebratory role and even the sweets and the candies that we learn about, it just seems like food is tracking the growing delight and learning that’s happening for Harry and the gang. Particularly because Flamel is on one of the chocolate frog cards so that knowledge and food is just so tied closely together don’t you think?
Vanessa: Oh yeah and one of the very first things that we hear Dumbledore talk about is his love for lemon drops, which a muggle candy and so we learn very early on from Dumbledore's love of a certain kind of food that he's okay in the muggle world. And then at the end we see Dumbledore eat candy but in a different setting, there's all of that candy by Harry's bedside in the hospital wing and as a communion, a breaking of bread with Harry, even though Dumbledore admits he has this traumatic experience with Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans he says to Harry, “Oh I'll try one for the first time in year,” and says, “oh I'll take this color one because it’s a safe color,” and tries it and admits to Harry that he made a mistake and even he does the wrong thing sometimes and says, “ugh, it’s ear wax flavored.” And so we see Dumbledore eating candy and having different relationships to food bookends the novel. It's also just struck me that the two times we see Dumbledore eat candy in this book at the very beginning it’s where he’s giving Harry up and at the very end it’s where he’s connecting with Harry again and so Dumbledore and Harry and candy have this very strong through line throughout this novel.

Casper: The other thing I'm just realizing now is that mean times are the only times the entire school are together. Even during a Quidditch match, someone is probably in the common room doing homework or is not that into sports, thank you very much. But at mealtimes everyone comes together and it’s the way that the school opens and closes it's time together. And so there’s a, I don’t want to say healing experience, but nonetheless there’s a moment of the whole coming together and being larger than the sum or its parts by celebrating over a meal. So I just hadn’t tracked the role food had played like that before.

(Sacred Reading theme music plays)

Vanessa: So Casper, Ariana gave us this great challenge of trying to pull one central message out of the novels and that we should each try to pull our own central message.

Casper: I'm excited to hear yours, what struck you from the novel? What message did you take away from the book?

Vanessa: Mine is: even when it's harder together, we're stronger together. What's yours?

Casper: Mine is: if he is delayed again and again, he may never return to power. I like that they're quite different.

Vanessa: Me too, but they are both about strength, right? They're both about power and who has it.

Casper: Ooooo, okay well tell me why did you choose yours?

Vanessa: The central message that I pulled out was, even though it's harder together, we're stronger together. So I don't know if this is a lot of people's experience, but growing up I hated
group projects because basically what happens when you’re on a group project is either someone’s really bossy or you’re the one who has to step up and be bossy and no one helps with the work. And as I’ve gotten older it’s just been abundantly true that things move slower when you’re in a group but you always get somewhere better when you’re in a group and I feel like that is one of the central lessons that Harry has to learn over the course of the series, but that he’s really learning here and that final adventure down in the bowels of the school, he would not have been able to do that without Ron and Hermione. And he only succeeds because they did this thing together. And I think the lesson that he’s just going to have to deal with again and again, is that even if it’s more annoying, even if you have to get more consensus, even if you have to be more vulnerable, relationships in the end can surprise you and really sustain you and even save you. Throughout the book they hate Snape and then it turns out that Snape was actually saving Harry. So I think we get taught again and again that relationships are what keep us alive.

Casper: That’s so great. Thanks for bringing that out.

Vanessa: What about you? Why’d you pick your sentence?

Casper: It just struck me so much that of all the knowledge bombs that Dumbledore is dropping that chapter, he includes this phrase, “if he is delayed again and again he may never return to power.” And I thought it was an astute description of how bad things happen. There’s that famous phrase, “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” And of course, “men” here should be “people” and “everyone” but there is something so true in that the people that Harry is facing here with Quirrell and Voldemort is something that has happened before and will happen again, and I love that this quote also speaks to the intergenerational nature of that challenge. That Harry’s parents have been in that fight, and Snape had been in that fight, and of course Dumbledore had been, in his own way, even before Voldemort. And it speaks to the job that all of us are called to do that we have to delay again and again the return to power of evil in one way or another, that it’s never complete and that all we can do is delay. And I think that we see that so concretely in how Harry and Voldemort encounter one another in that final chapter, that Voldemort does escape and will come back another day, but that he has successfully delayed that return. So it just really spoke to me that it me that time that I read it.

Vanessa: The thing that I also love about that is that sometimes small victories are all we can do. It’s often all that we can do. But it doesn’t always come down in banners and it doesn’t always get shown in house colors, sometimes it’s just keeping the evil away another day.

Casper: Absolutely. So Vanessa it’s time for us to offer our blessings and you have the whole of book one to choose a character from who you want to give a blessing to. Who is your blessing for today?
Vanessa: First I just want to say that it has been a challenge and real pleasure to commit myself to only blessing women. I've seen traits in certain women and have noticed otherwise invisible women to me because of this commitment and so it's been really fun. But I'm going to go with my obvious choice, so I'm going to bless our dear Hermione. And the reason I'm going to bless her is because I had a really profound experience with her in this book and that was, prior to this season I had never done an Ignation Spirituality Practice and you invited us to do that practice and so we this Ignation reading with Hermione being attacked by the troll. And prior to reading that scene as a sacred scene, I always thought that Hermione, Ron and Harry were eventually going to find out that they were all supposed to be friends anyway, it never occurred to me that it was a pivotal scene. And when we read it together we suddenly came to the agreement through this rigorous practice, that actually being attacked by the troll, traumatizes and really changes Hermione and she becomes braver because of it and she becomes humbler because of it and she goes in search of friends because of it. And so I just want to thank Hermione for being so wonderful that I love her so much that I wanted to pay her that attention. Because I think she taught me how much sacred practices can give us. And a lesson that came from that is that you can turn something traumatic into a trigger for all sorts of wonderful things. How about you Casper?

Casper: My blessing is for Severus Snape. You know he’s a bit of a background character for most of the book, but we learn this enormous detail about him that throughout that Quidditch match he has been counter-jinxing Quirrell who was trying to knock Harry off his broom. And then he’s so adamant about protecting Harry that the next game he wants to referee the match and he’s doing it not out of a place of love for Harry, it’s this very complicated mix of loyalty to Lilly and to try to avenge James and be done with the debt that he owes him for saving his life. It’s a very weird mix of complicated feelings, but what Snape is doing ultimately is saving Harry’s life. It’s this great gift of protection. It’s the physical embodiment of the beautiful love that his mother and his parents had for Harry really comes to life in Severus. And we’re going to learn a lot more about Snape in the books to come, but I think we’ve seen here the promise of something true and something beautiful under a whole layer of bitterness and pain. And so I think for any of us who are feeling bitter, to trust that just like Snape, there is something under that which is still good and true. And which is worth loving.

(Outro Music Begins)

Casper: We’re not doing a voicemail this episode because next week we’re doing a special edition of catching up with Owl Post. So you’ll get to hear from a number of listeners who have been enjoying the show and we’ll also hear from a special guest who has meant a lot to us in helping us think through this podcast. We’ll take a couple of weeks off and then we’ll be back with Book Two.

Vanessa: This has been Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, produced by Arianna Nedelman, Casper ter Kuile, and me, Vanessa Zoltan.
Casper: Please subscribe and review the podcast wherever you find it. And follow us on social media where you can find our handle @HPSacredText.

Vanessa: Our Social Media Coordinator is Jen Stark, our music is by Ivan Pizzo and Nick Bohl.

Casper: Thank you to everyone who sent in voicemails. Thanks to Rebecca and Charlie Ledley, Laruen Taylor, Shane Bannon, and Rufus. The Harvard Communications Office.

Vanessa: The Humanist Hub.

Casper: And the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* Reading Group. See you next week.

*(Outro Music Ends)*

Casper: End of Book 1.

*Final Music: Panoply*