Women of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text: Mrs. Figg

(Theme Music Begins)

Vanessa: Hi Ariana.

Ariana: Hi Vanessa.

Vanessa: I’m so excited that we decided to meet on this volcano in Hawaii today.

Ariana: Yeah it could go off at any moment but that’s kind of thrilling.

(Theme music fades)

Vanessa: Yeah, yeah.

Ariana: Vanessa who we blessing today?

Vanessa: We’re blessing the delightful and brave Mrs. Figg.

Ariana: I love that description of her as brave.

Vanessa: She is brave. She’s a spy living a spy’s life.

Ariana: I feel like every time Mrs. Figg gets mentioned in the books, at least for the first few times we meet her, she’s “mad Mrs. Figg” or “batty Mrs. Figg”…

Vanessa: Yeah.

Ariana: She always has a descriptive word with her. So I love that we’ve just replaced it with “brave Mrs. Figg” instead of “batty Mrs. Figg.”

Vanessa: Yeah, brave Mrs. Figg, I love her. Being batty is just part of her cover, that’s not real.

Ariana: Ooo interesting, so is there something specific that you want to bless brave Mrs. Figg for?

Vanessa: So I would like to bless Mrs. Figg for being the best kind of liar. She is a liar with a purpose and only lies in order to protect other people. Mrs. Figg has been given this job of sort of being complicit in Harry’s caretaking in an abusive home, but watching over him; and she lies to do everything in her power to protect him. And it is just exactly the kind of lying that I respect and she’s shameless in her lies and I freaking love her for it.

Ariana: Okay can you tell me where you see her lying?
Vanessa: Well first of all she lies about her whole identity. She never tells Harry that she’s a squib, right? She’s like batty Mrs. Figg across the street, she doesn’t tell Harry, “I know Dumbledore,” she even tells Harry, “I’m sorry I was so terrible to you, but if I was nice to you, the Dursleys wouldn’t let you come over.” And so she lies about her whole identity.

Ariana: Yeah I mean, she is, as you say, a spy – she is living undercover. We know, as I was kind of reading back over the Mrs. Figg references in the books, she’s mentioned at the end of book four, when Voldemort comes back and Dumbledore says, “okay we need to calm Mundungus Fletcher; we need to call x, y, z; we need to call x, y, z; and we need to call Arabella Figg.” And Harry, of course, doesn’t process it at that moment, because he wouldn’t think that the person that Dumbledore is talking about is his neighbor, Mrs. Figg. But Mrs. Figg is old guard Order of the Phoenix. She’s been fighting this war for a very long time, and it’s very clear to me that she was placed undercover to look after Harry. She did not just happen to live there, and that she’s taken on this whole life for the sake of this cause, and I don’t think that we appreciate that about her. She’s completely undercover, she’s living her whole life differently for the sake of Harry; and that includes not explicitly lying to him. He never asks, “are you a squib? Do you know about the magical world?” She just leads her life in a way that makes everyone assume that she is a muggle.

Vanessa: Yeah but also she explicitly is less fun with him than she sort of naturally is, she says it. She says, “I’m sorry I was so boring and would always show you those pictures of cats.”

Ariana: I don’t know about that. I agree with you that she says that. I think there’s something authentic about Mrs. Figg’s love of cats, and I think when she’s trying to entertain him, she lets him watch television; but she also gives him stale cake. I don’t think Mrs. Figg has a natural understanding of what to do with a child, though I do think she is trying to be boring for the sake of the Dursleys.

Vanessa: So I disagree, I think that this gets to my blessing of her being a great liar, which is great liars tell partial truths. And so I think she loves her cats, and she’s exploiting it by being like, “if I show him 100 pictures of my cats, he’ll go home and he’ll tell the Dursleys, ‘all she did was show me pictures of her dumb cats.’” I think she’s playing up this part of herself of the crazy cat lady.

Ariana: I just think what we come to learn later in the books is that her cats aren’t really cats – they’re Kneazles, they’re magical creatures and they spy for her. She sends them out to keep an eye on Harry. And I do think she has real relationships with them, and perhaps these are the only relationships that she gets to have when she’s undercover. When she’s so disconnected from the magical world; she has her friends, these Kneazles, who are keeping her company. I think you’re right that there is something authentic in that, and a half-truth, because she’s presenting herself as a kind-of troupe of a cat lady that is easy for muggles for digest and write-off and make fun of and not pay attention to. When she is the one you should be paying attention to because she’s the spy.
Vanessa: Right another obvious lie that she does is with the Dementors, right? And again I think this is a partial truth, I do think that when Dudley and Harry get attacked in the beginning of book five, I do think that Mrs. Figg experiences the feeling of the Dementors. It does get dark we know from the beginning of book six that Dementors can make even muggles feel hopeless and sad and depressed, and so I do think Mrs. Figg experiences the Dementors and really thinks they’re there. But she describes as having seen them physically and does a really bad job at it, but she knows from her years of spying that you have to do more than say a feeling you have to walk the walk. And so she lies and she’s lying under oaths under the Wizengamot. And she’s just doing it to protect her ward. And I just love that, she’s not a convincing liar, but she’s a liar for the right reasons.

Ariana: Yeah and again, she’s playing with troupes that they already have against them. So in the muggle world she’s playing with this troupe of the crazy cat lady and in the wizarding world she’s playing the troupe of the squib. People don’t know about squibs, they’re like; “Oh do squibs live among muggles on Privet Drive? Maybe they do, we don’t care about them, so we don’t keep track of them.” She is there on Privet Drive for a purpose. Dumbledore has put her there.

Vanessa: And she’s living in the wizarding world, in terms of in conversation with the wizarding world.

Ariana: Right, and I think if that information were to come out in front of the Wizengamot, that would be highly suspicious as to her testimony being able to be taken at face value. But that doesn’t come out because they don’t ask her because they don’t really know that much about squibs and think that she is a little bit silly and not worth taking seriously.

Vanessa: Oh my god this makes me wonder about every little old lady I know. I’m going to quote Stephanie Paulsel here; she recently said, in response to something Trump said about a fifty-year-old woman who he wouldn’t pay attention to. She said, “the best thing about turning fifty as a woman is that you become invisible to men.” And I think Mrs. Figg is someone who is completely exploiting that rather than resenting it. And it is a terrible truth that women of a certain age become socially irrelevant to the patriarchy and Mrs. Figg is like, “hahaha.”

Ariana: It’s so interesting that status of “crazy cat lady,” because I think it is both at once this nonthreatening, hilarious figure to be made fun of – it gets made fun of a lot in our popular culture – and also the reason that we’ve constructed it is because of the threat of an unmarried older woman. We have to construct her as crazy; we have to construct her as somebody who has overflowing natural, feminine, maternal urges that get placed onto animals in this way that’s a little bit creepy...

Vanessa: ...and pathetic.

Ariana: And pathetic.

Vanessa: Because poor woman doesn’t have a man so obviously she’s pathetic.
Ariana: Exactly. I have this quote actually about it from Fiona Probyn-Rapsey who says, “it is an undercurrent of sexism and animalization that situations women and animals as forming a dangerous alliance: dangerous to her precarious grip on humanness and its psychic corollaries (reason, rationality, transcendence). At the heart of the “joke” about the crazy cat lady is that she has gone to far.” And I think that there is at once something nonthreatening and something so threatening about a woman who is older who doesn’t have children or a husband, who loves animals.

Vanessa: Yeah who doesn’t? I mean it’s about the fact that they don’t need a man to be happy.

Ariana: Right, but I want to get back to the heart of your blessing which is about lying.

Vanessa: Yes, so here’s my theory and I’m wondering what you think about it. So at the very beginning of book one in chapter two of book one, it’s Dudley’s birthday and Mrs. Figg informs the Dursley’s that she has broken her ankle and therefore she cannot watch Harry. I think that Mrs. Figg did break her ankle because we know just a couple days later; Dudley almost hits her with his bike while she’s out on crutches. I think that Mrs. Figg was completely capable of letting Harry sit in front of the TV and watching him and that she lied to the Dursley’s so that poor Harry could go to the zoo.

Ariana: Yeah what does Harry do at Mrs. Figg’s house that requires her to run around?

Vanessa: And if anything, have the neighbor boy a little bit help you, right? There’s no reason why Harry couldn’t go and sit on her couch and look at cat pictures and watch TV.

Ariana: And again, she’s playing into something that the Dursley’s already believe. They believe that Harry’s dangerous; they believe that if you take your eyes off him he’ll smash things and grow his hair back, x, y, z. And they think he needs this active form of supervision that he doesn’t necessarily. I’m torn about whether or not I like your theory because on the one hand it makes her out to be this incredibly brilliant, conniving woman, which I love. And on the other hand there’s something about me that likes the idea that she is a little bit scattered, a little bit dotty, and that she’s also a brilliant spy. That she can hold both of those things and be bad at taking care of a kid, doesn’t know what to feed him, doesn’t know what to show him, but also really good at her job.

Vanessa: Yeah I think that’s right but I think that both can be true in my theory. Because I think she did trip over one of her cats and maybe because it’s a Kneazle, like they got into a fight and the Kneazle did it on purpose. Like who knows what life they are living. But I do think that she tripped over one of them, and I do think that she broke her ankle. And I also think we see that she’s more fun than she pretends to be, but she could’ve fed him stale cakes in the fridge or Petunia can you send him over with a cake because my ankle’s broken.” I just think she heard from Petunia, “can you please watch Harry, we’re taking our son to the zoo.” And she was like, “No I guess you’ll have to take him to the zoo with you.”
Ariana: Or maybe she was on official Order business that day and had to do something secret and wonderful?

Vanessa: Maybe, I still like my theory best that she’s always...her assignment is to keep an eye on Harry and part of her keeping an eye on this child is making sure that he has a little bit of joy in his life. And I would imagine that it’s very frustrating for her that Dumbledore put her there to protect this child and she can’t protect him from the one thing that she knows is happening to him all the time which is him enduring abuse and neglect at this house. And in fact, she has to add to it by being a little bit stale and boring because she knows if she is entertaining at all, she won’t be able to see him ever. And so I feel this is the one moment where she can play her part and give this child some joy and we know she’s willing to go to incredible lengths to lie to protect and make Harry’s life a little bit better and so why won’t you just let me have this theory?

Ariana: I’ll let you have it. It doesn’t threaten my conception of Mrs. Figg at all. And it seems like a very nice thing for you to have, you can have it.

Vanessa: I will take your patronizing offer.

Ariana: So back to lying - I agree with you that there’s no categorical imperative that we should always tell the truth, that it’s always the best way. I am a compulsive truth telling in my life. I find it very necessary to be honest in every occasion and I think in most cases it’s a good thing, like you’ve mentioned that it helps people trust me because they know they can ask my opinion and that I won’t lie to them. That I will tell them what I see. I guess my question for you is mostly I think my compulsive truth-telling as a good thing, but I see your case that lying is often a good thing, and should I lie to people more, is my question?

Vanessa: Ummm so I think lying is important when the stakes are high. And the stakes are high in very specific ways. So I’m the grandchild of Holocaust survivors and the only way that you could hide people was by lying. And my partner’s grandfather hid communists under his coals in his house. And that required when SS officers came to his door, saying “nope, no communists here.” And so I just think lying can be an act of bravery and virtue and I think that Mrs. Figg is engaged in exactly that, she’s protecting a child in war situations.

Ariana: So I don’t think that anyone’s going to fight you on that. Hiding people who are being persecuted is a good thing. My question is: are there moments in my life where I should think about lying or where lying can be virtuous?

Vanessa: So here’s the thing: I think that sometimes lying is also humility because we don’t know. Like if a friend of mine asks if I like her boyfriend, I will say yes even if I don’t personally like them because if the criteria is he’s good to you and kind to you – as long as he’s good to her, it doesn’t matter if I like them.

Ariana: But in that situation I would say, “It seems like he’s good to you and kind to you and I’m glad that you found someone like that.”
Vanessa: Yeah I think I’d be like, “of course I like him. He’s good to you.”

Ariana: I just think for me there’s weirdly something personal at stake at not wanting to say the lie. And it gets me in trouble sometimes, like I think sometimes my friends just want me to agree with them and comfort them and I’m like finicky about it. Like I won’t say that I like him if I don’t like him because it feels like a betrayal of this weird ingrained morality that I have.

Vanessa: Yeah and for me, it feels aspirational. One of my good friends, I did not like her now-husband at the beginning and I was just like, “I like him, I like him, I like him.” And it’s now been eight years and I genuinely like him. And I didn’t know him, is he who I would have picked to go on dates with myself? Absolutely not. I think he’s kind of boring. But it turns out that he’s a really good man with really weird hobbies and I super respect that. And I’ve matured and it turns out that my friend was just more mature than I was when we were 27 and saw these great things in him before I did. And I just don’t think it helps anyone if I say, “I really think he’s good to you.” Like I think everyone reads between the lines in that I will absolutely tell my friend if I don’t like them, if I don’t trust them I will risk that for my friend. I will say, “I do not think he’s nice to you.” But anything short of that, I guess I just feel like my feelings are actually irrelevant.

Ariana: Yeah, you don’t think lying to someone is a little bit patronizing? You can trust someone to tell the truth, to tell what you actually feel? And let them hold that however it is that it’s important for them to hold that? And that there’s something really beautiful about being able to be completely truthful with a friend?

Vanessa: I do think it’s patronizing. I’m not above wanting to be patronized sometimes. I guess it’s simultaneously patronizing and humble. Because it’s like I don’t know, right? You care what I think because you love me, but I know that I don’t objectively have great taste in men. I’ve dated some bad ones. I think it is both patronizing and humble, it’s like my opinion doesn’t actually matter on this. And when I truly believe in my opinion, I will speak it.

Ariana: Yeah.

Vanessa: And I guess it also depends on the motivation. I am not looking at my friends being like, “you can’t handle the truth. You can’t handle the objective truth that I don’t find your boyfriend completely charming.” Instead it’s like, “I don’t know, he seems this about him would rub me the wrong way. I wouldn’t want to kiss his face.” Like who cares?

Ariana: I think for me what it comes down to is a lot of my friends, part of our dynamic is that we sense check one another. That we come to each other and we’re saying, “am I crazy for thinking this? For feeling this?” And it feels wrong to me to lie to someone in that vulnerable moment of them being like, “I don’t know if I’m right or wrong here.”

Vanessa: I would never lie to somebody in that situation. I think that’s right. I think if somebody’s asking for a stabilizing thing, that it’s your job to stabilize them with the truth. And
I think the truth is rock solid and lies can crumble. My grandmother used to say, “Lies have very long legs that can always catch up to you.” And I think that’s right, and I think that there’s a risk to lying.

Ariana: Even when it’s not the explicit thing that my friend is saying to me, that is the undercurrent of a lot of people interact with the stories that they’re telling from their lives.

Vanessa: Do you think that I’m wrong to tell people that I like their boyfriends even if I don’t? By the way, I really do like your boyfriend.

Ariana: I think if I’m asking, if I’m soliciting your advice it’s because there’s something I’m worried about, there’s something I don’t know. I think you meet my boyfriend and I’m like, “what do you think?” You can say, “oh yeah he’s so cute.” But if I say, “what do you think of him? Is he good? Am I being blinded by my recent break-up? Help me think about this.” And you’re like, “yeah he’s great,” when you don’t think he’s great then I’m going to feel betrayed down the line.

Vanessa: Totally, and I wouldn’t lie in that situation. I would ask more questions like, “why? What are your concerns?”

Ariana: Right.

Vanessa: And again, I just think this is coming from a little bit of humility of like, “I don’t know him and I don’t know what works for you.”

Ariana: Yeah and I mean I think where we get in trouble with truth telling is when we think that our opinion is the truth, when we think it’s the right answer. And when we position ourselves in relationship with people as if we have the right answer and we’re either holding it from someone or we’re giving it to someone. It’s never the case... there are very rarely right answers, it’s only when the Nazi’s come knocking – and what you have if your opinions and perspective and that’s your to share however gently you thin kit is appropriate to share. Okay so let’s bring it back to Mrs. Figg.

Vanessa: The point that I take from you is: isn’t it patronizing of Mrs. Figg to act more miserable than she really is? Couldn’t she say to Harry, “hey buddy you can’t tell your aunt and uncle because they won’t let you come here anymore,” and do something fun with him? And they have their own funny routines where they do fancy tea parties, or just something slightly less miserable. And at what point could Harry have kept that secret and they actually had this moment of respite and been closer. And I do think that Harry would have been capable of that and I do think that if Mrs. Figg was more committed to honesty rather than patronizing him, to your point, and been like “he can’t handle going back and lying to his aunt and uncle,” I think that they could have been even closer, and she could have been an even better spy. But that would have required Harry to go home and lie to Petunia and Vernon, so I think her small lie pays off, right?
Ariana: That’s so interesting because I also think then when it comes out that she’s a squib, it would be a greater betrayal to Harry then she would have been more explicitly lying to him if he would have been a real connection and a real relationship.

Vanessa: Right, so she’s not turning Harry into a liar and she’s not creating a greater sense of intimacy for a greater sense of betrayal later. So again I agree with myself that it’s good that she’s lying.

Ariana: Yeah I think we can both agree that Mrs. Figg is incredible in these books and she lies brilliantly and the question is just how to carry over that into our lives and how we think about how we lie to ourselves and to our friends. So if you were to restate why you’re blessing Mrs. Figg?

Vanessa: I would like to bless Mrs. Figg for being the right kind of liar. For being a liar in order to take care of somebody else and humble and empathetic, and I love her.

Ariana: Okay Vanessa it is time for our quiz.

Vanessa: I’m ready.

Ariana: Great, when thinking about Mrs. Figg, I got really interested in crazy cat ladies, specifically how that troupe got developed in our culture. This idea of the folk-devil that plays on our anxiety about unmarried women, and so I have a couple questions for you about that. About cats, their domestication, their relationship with humans and also their relationship with women.

Vanessa: Great, I have two little girls in my life who are obsessed with cats.

Ariana: My first question is why did ancient Egyptians begin to tame and feed cats?

(a) Because they learned quickly that cats would kill rats that they had in their grain storage.
(b) Because of cats association with the deity Basset they were considered auspicious.
(c) Because Pharaoh Hatshepsut had them and made them cool for other people to start having them.
(d) The first cat sighting happened on the day of an earthquake and they took that to be a sign.

Vanessa: I just think it’s so funny how committed you are to truth telling and how much you love writing these fake answers and how good you are at them.

Ariana: I appreciate that, I wouldn’t say I love it; I would say it makes me anxious. I really want to do a good job, and so I wouldn’t say that I revel in it, but I am glad that you think I’m doing a good job.
Vanessa: You are. I think it’s (b).

Ariana: You’re wrong, it’s because they killed rats in the grain storage...

Vanessa: Oh.

Ariana: ...and then that led to their deification, etc.

Vanessa: Yes, that is why I would have a cat too, to kill things.

Ariana: They basically saved the food supply in Egypt.

Vanessa: Yeah, I just learned in medieval times the Census was done by somebody going door to door and just interviewing people and a Census taker asked a man, “Who lives here?” And, “what’s their profession?” And they started writing down their answer and the man was like, “well I have a mouse catcher whose name is Felix and is seven years old.” And then the Census taker wrote, “Felix is a cat.”

Ariana: Okay my second question: the first mention of a familiar in an English Witch Trial occurred in 1556. The story was that Elizabeth Francis had received a talking cat named Satan from her grandfather as a gift once she had renounced God. In exchange for doing her bidding, Francis had to do what for her cat?

   (a) Give the cat the bed while she slept on the floor.
   (b) Kill a bird with her own two-hands every fortnight.
   (c) Keep the entrances of her house open for him to enter and exit as he pleased.
   (d) Feed him a drop of her blood to keep him content.

Vanessa: (d).

Ariana: That’s right. Third question, not really about cats but about this old-maid spinster-ness idea. In the seventeenth century, a woman who’s unmarried at twenty-three was considered a spinster in New England...

Vanessa: Still.

Ariana: What was she called if she was still unmarried by twenty-six?

   (a) An addle-pot
   (b) A thornback
   (c) A spider
   (d) A nipperkin

Vanessa: I think a thornback.
Ariana: You’re right! Do you know what a thornback is?

Vanessa: Somebody who you don’t touch their back because it’s thorny.

Ariana: It’s an ugly spine-fish that you can find around Boston.

Vanessa: Oh so I got lucky. I’m so good about spinsters.

Ariana: I myself am a thornback and proud.

Vanessa: Yes I am as well.

Ariana: We should make badges.

Vanessa: Yes. Thornback and Proud.

Ariana: Yeah we’ll create a thornback society. Fourth and final question, it’s a fill in the blank question.

Vanessa: Great.

Ariana: I’m going to read you an excerpt from Potter’s American Monthly 1881.

Vanessa: Great.

Ariana: Tradition associates her with cats and ______ on which she is supposed to lavish all that is left with affection in her withered heart, while she loathes babies, those croll darlings in conjugal love. And doles out, but sparing, the milk of human breast is supposed to hold for ties of blood and kindred.

Vanessa: plants.

Ariana: Ummmm.

Vanessa: Sorry.

Ariana: I mean that would be the truth today, but in 1881 was it:
  (a) Hedgehogs
  (b) Llamas
  (c) Weasels
  (d) Parrots

Vanessa: D – parrots.
Ariana: That’s true, I have no idea why but reading this thing on spinsters, I just thought it was fascinating that old women were associated with parrots. Where did the crazy parrot ladies go?

Vanessa: Well cats and parrots which is funny because wouldn’t the cats want to kill the parrots?

Ariana: Maybe they developed beautiful relationships.

Vanessa: The parrots could fly away.

Ariana: Or save them and the parrots could chat about how to conspire against all men.

Vanessa: And how to make sure to get your monthly dose of a drop of blood.

Ariana: Exactly, a shout out to Katherine Sullivan Barak whose dissertation, “Spinsters, Old Maids, and Cat Ladies: A Case Study in Containment Strategies,” which I read and where I got all of these facts from.

Vanessa: Amazing that you read someone’s dissertation for this quiz.

Ariana: I love my job.

Vanessa: Ariana thank you so much for taking this time to bless Mrs. Figg with me. I’m so glad that this volcano didn’t erupt the entire time we were on it.

Ariana: Well let’s get off it before it does.

Vanessa: Yeah, let’s go.

(Outro music begins)

Ariana: This has been an episode of Women of Harry Potter is a production of Not Sorry Productions. Executive produced by me, Ariana Nedelman...

Vanessa: ...and me, Vanessa Zoltan.

Ariana: Edited and produced by Chelsea Ursin. Our music is by Nick Bolh. And we will talk to you in a few weeks.

Vanessa: Bye.