

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

This episode contains explicit language and references to sexual violence.

It is not suitable for young listeners.

So when I first became interested and then deeply troubled by what I saw as a cultural movement that was illiberal in its methods and was very questionable in its ideas, I absolutely knew that if I spoke out, many people who would love my books would be deeply unhappy with me.

I knew that.

I knew because I knew that I could see that they believed they were living the values that I had espoused in those books.

I could tell that they believed they were fighting for underdogs and difference and fairness.

And I thought it would be easier not to.

You know that this could be really bad.

And honestly, it has been bad.

Personally, it has not been fun.

And I have been scared at times for my own safety and I overwhelmingly for my family's safety.

Time will tell whether I've got this wrong.

I can only say that I've thought about it deeply and hard and long and I've listened and promised to the other side and I believe absolutely that there is something dangerous about this movement and it must be challenged.

Number five, the tweets.

Let's talk about the tweets.

Let's talk about them.

On the 19th of December, 2019, JK Rowling finally jumped into the public conversation around sex and gender.

By that point, she'd spent years following the debate and had become increasingly concerned about what she saw as a vocal group of trans rights advocates unfairly targeting feminists who disagreed with them, so she weighed in with a tweet.

Would you be willing to read the tweet that you wrote that day?

Yeah.

I tweeted, dress however you please, call yourself whatever you like, sleep with any consenting adult who'll have you, live your best life in peace and security, but force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real, hashtag I stand with Maya, hashtag this is not a drill.

What did you want to accomplish with that tweet?

This tweet was in response to the Maya Forstata case.

Maya Forstata had posted a series of messages on social media opposing the government's proposals to reform the Gender Recognition Act.

Maya Forstata posted a number of tweets expressing her beliefs and her contract with her employer was not renewed after a number of her colleagues complained.

The incident that would finally push Rowling into speaking publicly involved a woman named Maya Forstata who had spoken out online against the so-called self-ID proposal in the UK.

She asserted that biological sex was unchangeable and that this law would undermine women's rights.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

After posting tweets like men cannot change into women, she was accused of offensive language and lost her job.

She was called a bigot, a transphobe and a danger to trans people.

Some of her colleagues complained and ultimately the non-profit where she worked did not renew her contract.

And so she decided to fight this claiming that she'd been the victim of unlawful discrimination.

Disagreement is not harassment.

People can have different views and we ought to be able to talk about them.

This is Forstata, speaking with a journalist for Sky News.

Gender critical belief, which is the absolutely ordinary belief about sex, that your mother and your grandmother are women, that being female is a thing, is worthy of respect in a democratic society and people who hold that belief shouldn't be discriminated against or harassed for expressing it.

In the UK, they have what's known as an employment tribunal, which is a dedicated part of the legal system that exclusively deals with disputes between employers and employees.

When Forstata took her former employer to this court, she said that as a citizen of a democracy, she had a right to voice her criticism of a proposed law in public.

But a few of her colleagues saw her words as crossing the line into transphobia.

Senator's comments in dispute before the court read, in part, everyone's equality and safety should be protected, but women and girls lose out on privacy, safety and fairness if males are allowed into changing rooms, dormitories, prisons, and sports teams.

She also wrote, of course, in social situations, I would treat any trans women as an honorary female and use whatever pronouns, etc.

I wouldn't try to hurt anyone's feelings, but I don't think people should be compelled to play along with literal delusions like trans women are women.

In December 2019, the judge ruled against Forstata.

In the published ruling, he wrote that Forstata's belief, quote, is not a philosophical belief protected by British law.

He wrote, I consider that the claimant's view in its absolutist nature is incompatible with human dignity and fundamental rights of others.

The judgment said that basically her speech in this case could not be protected because it was not worthy of respect in a democratic society.

This is Kathleen Stock, a philosopher, writer, and for many years, a professor at the University of Sussex.

This was shocking to me, very shocking to me, because first of all, it seemed like the judge had completely lost the plot.

Actually, it made a big material difference to any other woman who was in an employment situation and who went online to express reasonable worries about a policy that says that any man can legally become a woman just by saying that he is.

Over the past few years, Stock has become one of the most vocal academics in all of the UK on behalf of the feminist side in the debate about self-ID.

And she saw this ruling as a danger to free speech in a democratic society.

So I then went to my blog in a fury, really, and typed out quite a short piece called This is Not a Drill.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

In the hours after the ruling, she wrote a call to action, directed at her fellow academics. So I made a call in this blog post to them directly.

I call upon you to stand up and say that there should be free speech on this issue.

And I was always very careful to distinguish between the position of someone like Maya, who thinks that there are significant problems with the idea you can change your sex, for instance, and the right of us to say it, even if we're wrong.

So my plea to academics was to stand up for the principle that you should be legally permitted to believe and say that biological sex is immutable without fear of losing your job.

And if it turns out that we're wrong, we should still absolutely have the right to say it.

The whole point of a university is to contest groupthink or received wisdom.

Maybe that contestation will only serve to reinforce the groupthink, but at least it would have been tested.

And it has to be tested because there's so many instances from history of where groupthink can go wrong, severely wrong, either empirically or ethically.

So academics should have the central role in the culture of testing received wisdom and introducing controversial ideas in order that they may be rationally and empirically discussed.

And while this post didn't cause a flood of support from her colleagues, it very quickly found its way to JK Rowling.

The conclusion was reached that her belief that sex is fundamentally immutable was not worthy of respect.

You couldn't hold that as a philosophical belief.

Seeing other feminists stand up in support of Maya and against the notion that a person might have to lose their job just for stating this view, Rowling decided that the time had come for her to speak up.

I felt that the tribunal was wrong.

I think there is, in my view, considerable evidence for the fact that a woman is the producer of the large gametes, and I found it outrageous that this employment tribunal had decided no, that belief wasn't worthy of respect.

So I decided I'm standing up, I'm standing up right now, I'm done.

I drafted the tweet and then I was considerate enough to phone my management team and say, you cannot argue me out of this, and I read out what I was about to say because I felt they needed warning because I knew it was going to cause a massive storm.

I tweeted, dress however you please, call yourself whatever you like, sleep with any consenting adult who have you.

In seconds of her hitting publish, the replies started pouring in and I knew what was coming and sure enough it came.

You are so disappointing.

Watching your book sales plummet will be lovely.

Say whatever you want, but don't be surprised when you're called out as a turf.

You don't have to be a transphobe, you know, you could also just say nothing.

Pretty sure that Hitler and Nazis have the same view as you and Maya when it comes to being a certain sex.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

They gassed trans people and anyone else who was different.

Within hours, GLAD, an organization that praised Rowling as a writer who helped LGBT fans find their identities and communities, said, JK Rowling has aligned herself with an anti-science ideology that denies the basic humanity of people who are transgender.

The International, a place where Rowling had actually worked for a time in her 20s and which she credits as having a profound effect on her worldview, tweeted, facepalm emojis along with, just in case anyone needs reminding, trans rights equal human rights, over and over again.

There were a lot of people who were genuinely troubled and they posted sincere questions about what Rowling was thinking, like the actress Mara Wilson who asked, what exactly is to be gained by using your platform to be cruel and exclusionary to one of the world's most vulnerable populations?

And many of those responding were among the most passionate fans of Harry Potter.

I have been a huge fan of yours for as long as I can remember and it breaks my heart to see this.

Such a shame that you've become the evil that you taught so many of us to stand up to.

You're on the wrong side of history with this one.

I hope you come to realize this with time.

Your open disdain towards the trans community is the most disappointing revelation my generation has witnessed regarding people we once looked up to.

This makes me so sad for millions of children that grew up reading your books.

Trans women are women and you have broken this heart that your books so often healed.

As a gay man that found safety in Hogwarts throughout my childhood, knowing that trans people wouldn't be able to have that safety breaks my heart.

MuggleNet, the original Harry Potter fan site that Rowling had embraced all those years ago, published a statement alongside a trans rights flag saying, we want every single Potter fan out there to know that the MuggleNet community stands with you.

We see you, we hear you, we support you.

Harry Potter conference runners, YouTubers and podcasts started tweeting things like, I am baffled that the woman who created such a loving, welcoming and accepting community can be openly transphobic.

I don't understand how you can write seven books about acceptance but then not accept everyone.

It's truly disappointing.

From the outside, it really looked like the entire Harry Potter internet world.

These people who had largely placed you on this pedestal in a way that you said made you uncomfortable was now saying you were a disgrace.

Yeah, there was absolutely fury and incomprehension.

We talked about this before when you got that criticism from the right and it was so wide of the mark as you say that it didn't really touch you.

I wondered, did it feel that way from the left as well?

Because if it's coming from people that you would have thought were allies, yes, that's absolutely going to hit differently.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

But I don't hold myself-

Because you share those fundamental values.

Because I would assume we share certain values.

So yeah, that hits differently, of course it hits differently.

But at the same time, I have to tell you a ton of Potter fans were still with me and

in fact a ton of Potter fans were grateful that I'd said what I said.

It's hard to measure the weight of supporters versus detractors over something like a tweet.

But it is true that Rowling's post, which was retweeted and liked by hundreds of thousands of people, had many responses in support and appreciation.

They said things like, the number of likes for this tweet will never convey to you how much it mattered that you were willing to tweet it.

It felt like you stood with ordinary women and men who support them, as well as with Maya and it was a joy and a relief that the woman who gave us Harry Potter was prepared to do that.

Rowling also told me that she received thousands of private emails of support to her fan mail address.

Many of them saying that the sender was too scared to post publicly on Twitter and she shared some of these with me with names redacted.

And Rowling's post seemed to surprise and encourage several of the feminists who'd been targeted by campaigns to get them removed from their jobs and by protests.

Women like Kathleen Stock.

I was delighted to see, absolutely delighted because at the time it felt very like there was just a bunch of relatively insignificant women, including myself, howling into the void about it, to be honest, and getting no traction in the media, getting no traction politically.

Everyone treating us as if we were just total deplorables, which we were not.

What's interesting is the fans that found themselves in positions of power online, did they feel they needed to take this position because they themselves had followers?

Possibly.

I don't know.

I mean, I do know that there is huge pressure on people to take certain positions at the moment and I know that there is a huge amount of fear around it.

Some of them, I don't doubt, sincerely felt it.

They just couldn't understand, why, why, why aren't you simply repeating trans women or women?

Why aren't you doing that?

That is the kind and good and righteous thing to do.

I don't understand.

And I'm constantly told I don't understand my own books.

I'm constantly told that I have betrayed my own books.

My position is that I am absolutely upholding the positions that I took in Potter.

My position is that this activist's movement in the form that it's currently taking echoes the very thing that I was warning against in Harry Potter.

You know, I've been trying to hold out that this person who created a universe that led

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

to this community that has meant so much to me and taught me so many of these values of tolerance and acceptance and unconditional love, that she wouldn't really believe this, right?

No way.

This is Jackson Bird, an author whose memoir tells the story of how his Harry Potter fandom helped him find his true self.

After Rowling's tweet, he wrote an essay for The New York Times titled, Harry Potter Helped Me Come Out as Trans, but JK Rowling Disappointed Me.

But as you can hear in this excerpt from his appearance on Pottercast, like many fans in December 2019, he wasn't ready to totally turn his back on Rowling.

In some way, like I try to put myself in her shoes and I'm like, well, you know, she probably lives in this kind of bubble, you know, when you are that wealthy and you've had so much success, like you're not necessarily going to be meeting all kinds of different people in your life and it is a confusing topic.

And so maybe she came across this stuff from Turfland and it made a little bit of sense to her and she is such a staunch feminist and so she kind of fell for some of it maybe.

And I still kind of want to believe that I want to believe that after she gets over whatever defensiveness she's going to have from this reaction, maybe she will be willing to listen and learn and grow a little bit.

But then she tweeted again, only this time it was during the chaotic political moment that was the summer of 2020.

We'll be right back.

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I have been obsessed with mail since I was a little girl.

It always seemed so magical, these letters and packages from faraway friends and family just appearing at my house.

Postal workers would take the letters I scrolled and whisk them away to my globetrotting grandmother.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

And that childhood fixation is still going strong.

Don't get me wrong.

I love the ease of digital communication too, but there will always be something special about real mail.

And what's great now is that there's a tool that makes it super easy to ship letters and packages all over.

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After that single tweet in December of 2019 and the backlash from many fans, JK Rowling and her Twitter account went quiet.

She didn't release any statements.

She didn't respond to either supporters or critics, and although the story of the fans disappointed in her made its way around the world in news articles and tabloids, the story

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

seemed to fade from public consciousness pretty quickly.

There were no widespread calls for boycotts.

Her book sales did not suffer.

And quickly, much bigger stories dominated the world's attention.

We do have breaking news tonight, a deeply divided moment playing out in American history as we come on the air.

President Trump has just been impeached on both Article 1 abuse of power.

The very same week that Rowling sent her, I stand with Maya, tweet.

Now Donald Trump has become only the third U.S. president to be impeached.

The American president was impeached for the first time since Clinton in the 90s.

It's the single greatest witch hunt in American history, probably in history, but in American history.

And then?

China has more than 200 confirmed cases of coronavirus, it's called.

A new virus was spreading around the world.

A SARS-like virus which has infected hundreds in China has now reached the United States.

The World Health Organization has officially called it COVID-19.

A virus is more powerful in creating political, economic and social upheaval than any terrorist attack.

The virus has spread, then led to lockdowns around the world.

From this evening, I must give the British people a very simple instruction.

You must stay at home.

Schools were closed, schools closed, churches closed, restaurants, bars, beaches and even public parks.

People stayed home, and according to data that came out later, they were spending more time online, and especially on social media, than ever before.

Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, and by May, anti-lockdown protests started erupting around the world.

I've had enough of being told what I can and cannot do.

I want to be free, I want to live my life, I want all my friends to live their lives.

Then, a video came out of a white police officer kneeling on the neck of a black citizen named George Floyd.

Outrage spread across the country, then the world.

Mass protests here in the United States have sparked a global movement against racial discrimination,

leading to one of the largest protest movements of the 21st century.

But also, you can see police here now firing tear gas into the crowd, they are trying to push these folks back.

The most costly and deadly riots in America, since the LA riots in the 90s.

This unrest was also present online, where social media was full of outrage and anger and uncertainty, about COVID-19 and its origins, about racism in the US and what should be done to remedy it, about the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and about whether the current systems could remedy these problems, or whether those systems needed to be dismantled entirely.

There was a reckoning about the past, about historical figures and their statues, but

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

also about prominent people in the present.

We live in a time now where we have what we call cancel culture, man.

If you do something wrong, you're supposed to be out of here, and it could have been five minutes ago or it could have been 20, 30 years ago.

When the Twitter mob wants to cancel somebody, they're basically saying that a person has done something harmful.

Most journalists and writers faced backlashes over tweets and op-eds and lost their jobs.

Actors and musicians faced backlashes for insensitive lyrics or jokes and released apology videos.

And it was into this environment that on June 6th, 2020, JK Rowling tweeted again.

So can you set this up for me?

Where were you?

I was angry.

I was getting really angry.

What happens was I flipped open Twitter and I saw this article.

It was actually at the top of my feed, creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate.

This article that Rowling saw was using this sort of language that's become both more common and more polarizing in recent years, where outlets avoid using gendered words like women or mothers and instead use phrases like cervix havers, uterus havers, or pregnant people, or in this case, people who menstruate.

The idea is that it's more inclusive to those who don't identify as women but who are still experiencing things like menstruation or pregnancy.

But to many feminists, it's also seen as removing women from the center of experiences that directly affect them.

You know, there is power to words with history, both good and ill.

And to me, the word woman has its own power.

And I do not believe we can meaningfully analyze the harms done to women and girls without using language that has concrete meaning.

And I felt there's an obfuscation here.

Now, I'm coming to that article on the background of what I see as huge injustice and people trying to shut women down.

And I don't doubt that I too was being affected by the incredibly fibrile, oppressive atmosphere that we are all currently living in.

And that was inflaming my sense of injustice on behalf of women.

Rolling, just like so many others over the COVID lockdowns, had been spending more time online, in her case on Twitter.

And there, she continued to see how many women labeled as turfs were attacked as hate figures and told to shut up and go away and sent threats of violence and harassment day in and day out.

So I was angry and I was flippant.

So seeing this article, she just reacted.

You'll notice there was no courtesy call to my management at this point.

And a few seconds later, she sent a tweet to her 14 million followers.

And I tweeted in quotes, people who menstruate, I'm sure they used to be a word for those

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

people.

Someone helped me out, wombun, wimpund, wombud.

And that was like dropping a hand grenade into Twitter.

Did I mean to drop a hand grenade in?

No.

I was just keeping a reign on my own fury.

So off we went.

JK Rowling is back at her bullshit again.

Nope, men have periods too.

Stop hating trans people, you awful weirdo.

And again, within seconds, you fucking suck, is a fact that women can have penises and men can have vaginas.

The responses started pouring in.

Shit, at JK Rowling, shut the fuck up turf, you are ruining my childhood.

First of all, eat shit and die, you turf-ass bastard.

Only this time, there were magnitudes more and more enraged.

Never thought I would say this, but here we are, fuck you JK.

Your reductivism is harmful and ignorant.

At JK Rowling, shut the fuck up, a transphobic piece of shit.

Journalists and media figures started responding, God you're awful, goodnight and shut up.

I actually appreciate how much you are honest about being a huge fucking turd so that no one is confused about whether or not you're awful, doubling down on your turf-ness.

You are pathetic and embarrassing.

Your unapologetic ignorance is vile.

Celebrities with huge followings like Jamila Jamil and Halsey tweeted that JK Rowling had ruined her legacy.

Jonathan Van Ness shared a viral meme that said, Harry Potter and the audacity of this bitch.

Christ, you are such a colossal disappointment.

And it just kept going.

You are foul.

What a nasty piece of work you are.

Thanks to Love Your Box.

You absolutely disgust me, Tariff.

Your future is a stench.

But this time, instead of just sending the tweet and walking away, Rowling started to try to engage with her critics.

I responded with, if sex isn't real, there's no same-sex attraction.

If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased.

I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives.

It isn't hate to speak the truth.

Now I stand by every word that I wrote there, but the question is, what is the truth?

And I'm arguing against people who are literally saying sex is a construct.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

It's not real.

She tried to clarify that first flippant tweet and wrote, I respect every trans person's right to live any way that feels authentic and comfortable to them.

I'd march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans.

At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female.

I do not believe it's hateful to say so.

And yet, the more she responded, the more the criticism grew.

I literally cannot wrap my head around the fact that it is a global pandemic right now.

There is like a fucking revolution going on.

And J.K. Rowling sat down and thought, hmm, now is a good time to be transphobic.

Within minutes, the responses were moving from Twitter to other platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

It is highly problematic that this woman came out on Twitter as a full-blown transphobe in the middle of a civil rights revolution.

Let's talk about how J.K. Rowling has been a piece of shit for a hot-ass minute, but we were all just too young and jaded and infatuated with Harry Potter to really see it.

J.K. Rowling, I hate you so much.

I hate you so much.

You're awful.

As you're tweeting these things, how do you feel it's going?

Well, I think it's important to say that I'm not sitting there thinking, how am I doing here?

How am I positioning myself as though I'm a brand?

I am talking and thinking and feeling as an individual human being.

Reading it now, today, I'm amazed that I was pretty measured because I wasn't feeling measured at this point.

A lot of things had come together and I found it very enraging to watch hashtag be kind attached to tweets that I thought were utterly dehumanizing of women, utterly scathing about women's concerns.

J.K. Rowling is a whore, kindly fuck off, you turf cunt.

You hateful, spiteful, ignorant hag.

Rowling had said that part of the reason she spoke up was seeing the way that other women were harassed when they spoke up.

And now, that same harassment was coming for her.

At J.K. Rowling, choke on cock.

I'd really just love to fucking punch J.K. Rowling in her thick rectangle head.

J.K. Rowling, the transphobic fuck, can suck my dick and choke on it.

God, J.K. Rowling can gargle my cock and balls and hopefully choke on them right there and then so she can die and never write another absolutely inane transphobic tweet ever again.

J.K. Rowling can suck my dick and choke on it.

I do fuck J.K. Rowling.

Watch this movement behaving towards women in ways that I think are absolutely abhorrent.

J.K. Rowling, choke on this.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

As she read tweet after terrible tweet, far from changing her mind, they all seemed to serve as evidence, as confirmation that her concerns were justified.

Well, this is it, you see, because the turf is by her nature a hate-filled bigot.

Being a turf is evil.

At J.K. Rowling, you're a turf and need to be stoned.

She's evil.

She is evil.

And that is said openly.

That it is very biblical language that is used of women who say, you know what, I think any measure that makes it easier for predators to get at women and girls is a bad idea.

And there are plenty of women who wouldn't identify themselves as feminists who are very concerned about this.

But once you've internalized the idea that a turf is vermin and scum and all the other words that are used and that it's an easy step to punch all turfs, I kill turfs, this baseball bat will be used to smash in the...

I've literally seen there is no point in arguing with a turf.

We need to make them too frightened to speak.

J.K. Rowling, choke on this.

As all these tweets and other responses are coming in and you're sitting there reading them, how did you feel?

How did I feel?

Was it nice?

Was it fun?

No, it's horrible.

Because it's the scale.

I think people who have never been in that position, it is the scale, even though I knew it was coming.

But that's like knowing you're about to be punched, you know, this is gonna really hurt.

It's still, you know, you really need to take the punch to know how much it hurts.

Was it fun?

No.

Was I enjoying myself?

No.

When my producers and I started going through the responses to Rowling's tweets, even though we knew there'd be many threats and unhinged comments because, of course, this is the Internet, we weren't prepared for the sheer volume of violent sexual threats that we found.

It's hard to know exact numbers because Twitter has a policy of removing these tweets, but by our count, on top of the thousands that we saw that are still public, hundreds more have either been deleted by Twitter or removed by the authors.

Even if you just go to Twitter right now and type in JK Rowling's name, you'll see that these sorts of comments are seemingly endless, and they aren't just coming from online trolls writing from behind anonymous profiles, and they didn't just stay online.

Rowling's home address was doxxed, and law enforcement contacted her to say they were investigating credible threats of violence, and Rowling, in response to the hostility

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

flowing in her direction, posted a tweet that read, Feminazi, turf, bitch, witch.

Times change, woman hate is eternal.

But that just led to hundreds of people accusing her, one of the wealthiest, most privileged women in the world, of trying to paint herself as a victim.

Over the next 48 hours, the denunciations continued.

There was a torrent of negative headlines in news outlets around the globe calling her transphobic.

Then, the actors who'd starred in the Harry Potter films began releasing statements and distancing themselves from her, including Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, and Bonnie Wright, all of whom had known Rowling since they were children.

Some of the voices who'd been critical include the stars of her own movie, including the biggest star, Daniel Radcliffe.

That's right, Harry Potter himself responded, and in that statement, he wrote, transgender women are women, any statement to the contrary, erases the identity and dignity of transgender people and goes again.

Warner Brothers, the studio that released the Harry Potter films, released a statement that didn't denounce JK by name, but said they support the trans community and inclusivity.

On June 10th, 2020, four days after her initial tweets, Rowling published an essay on her website, expanding on her views.

This isn't an easy piece to write, she begins, for reasons that will shortly become clear.

But I know it's time to explain myself on an issue surrounded by toxicity.

I write this without any desire to add to that toxicity.

She then listed her reasons for speaking up, that she had concerns for women-only spaces like prisons and domestic violence shelters, that she worried about children not old enough to make life-altering medical decisions, that as the author of a series frequently targeted by bookbands, she was alarmed by the way conversations and debates were being shut down.

Then, she shared a personal story which she hadn't revealed until this moment.

Not just that she had been abused by her ex-husband, but that separately, she had also suffered a serious sexual assault.

She wrote, I've been in the public eye now for over 20 years and have never talked publicly about being a domestic abuse and sexual assault survivor.

This isn't because I'm ashamed those things happen to me, but because they're traumatic to revisit and remember.

I'm mentioning these things now, not in an attempt to garner sympathy, but out of solidarity with the huge numbers of women who have histories like mine, who have been slurred as bigots for having concerns around single-sex spaces.

If you could come inside my head and understand what I feel when I read about a trans woman dying at the hands of a violent man, you'd find solidarity and kinship.

I have a visceral sense of the terror in which those trans women will have spent their last seconds on earth, because I too have known moments of blind fear when I realized that the only thing keeping me alive was the shaky self-restraint of my attacker.

I believe the majority of trans-identified people not only pose zero threat to others, but are vulnerable for all the reasons I've outlined.

Trans people need and deserve protection.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

Like women, they're most likely to be killed by sexual partners.

Trans women who work in the sex industry, particularly trans women of colour, are at particular risk.

Like every other domestic abuse and sexual assault survivor I know, I feel nothing but empathy and solidarity with trans women who've been abused by men.

So I want trans women to be safe.

At the same time, I do not want to make natal girls and women less safe.

When you throw open the doors of bathrooms and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he's a woman, and as I've said, gender confirmation certificates may now be granted without any need for surgery or hormones, then you open the door to any and all men who wish to come inside.

That is the simple truth.

Rolling ended her essay with the following.

I haven't written this essay in the hope that anybody will get out a violin for me, not even a teeny weeny one.

I'm extraordinarily fortunate.

I'm a survivor, certainly not a victim.

I've only mentioned my past because, like every other human being on this planet, I have a complex backstory which shapes my fears, my interests, and my opinions.

I never forget that inner complexity when I'm creating a fictional character, and I certainly never forget it when it comes to trans people.

All I'm asking, all I want is for similar empathy, similar understanding to be extended to the many millions of women whose sole crime is wanting their concerns to be heard without receiving threats and abuse.

What in the living fuck did I read?

If her hope in writing that essay was to win over some of her critics in the days following its publication, there was plenty of evidence that it didn't work.

Many saw Rowling's essay as her death now and started sharing videos and memes, some saying that they were explaining J.K. Rowling's essay so you don't have to read it, others saying, Ding Dong, the witch is dead.

Seeing as J.K.

Rolling is such a terrible person.

I'm here with an official statement from the government to say we no longer recognise her as author of the Harry Potter series.

From now on, we're telling the future generations, look kid, we don't know who wrote that, just popped out of thin air like the Bible.

J.K. Rowling uses the fact that misogyny is real, it does exist, to be the constant victim.

And in her warped, awful morality, she thinks being a victim entitles her to victimise anyone that she wants to.

J.K. Rowling's opinions about trans issues literally get trans people killed, but stay comfortable I guess.

A trend started on TikTok, where users began burning their Harry Potter books.

So let me talk about the infamous book burning video for a second.

I am not just offended by what J.K. Rowling says, I am fearful because of what she is

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

promoting on her platform.

Or tearing them into pieces.

What am I doing you might ask?

I'm making recycled paper out of this book that I used to love, wrote by a transphobic author.

Campaigns were started to boycott her books and merchandise.

You need to stop buying Harry Potter books because a very homophobic, transphobic and racist woman would be profiting off of them.

And others, organised to get her books removed from schools.

Now J.K. Rowling will not be the last author that we need to vet and remove from our classrooms.

Our job as educators is to create safe and inclusive spaces for all our students.

We cannot do this if we have authors on our shelves that perpetuate hate and racism.

So, vet your books and get rid of problematic authors, done.

After Rowling's essay, Muggle Nett called her comments harmful to trans people.

And then, like other fan forums, they removed their photos of Rowling from the site.

Core fans got their Harry Potter tattoos removed.

At least two British schools removed Rowling's name from houses they had titled in her honour.

Players of Quidditch, the fictional sport she invented, ultimately changed its name to dissociate themselves from her.

An I Love J.K. Rowling poster that was hanging in a Scottish railway station was criticised as hate speech by some members of the public and then removed by transportation authorities.

But the backlash had far more impact on women who lack Rowling's power and privilege.

Jillian Phillip, a children's book author, added the hashtag I Stand With J.K. Rowling to her Twitter bio, igniting a wave of rape threats, death threats, and a campaign for her to be dropped by her publisher.

And just 24 hours later, she received a call from Harper Collins and was fired on the spot.

Unlike Rowling, she still needed income and now works as a truck driver.

Rosa Friedman, a human rights lawyer and professor, came out publicly against self-ID laws and received death and rape threats along with calls for her to be fired and even urine poured on her office store.

Joe Phoenix, a criminology researcher who works with women prisoners, spoke publicly in support of female-only prisons and was pushed out of her position at Open University after a petition was passed around calling her fundamentally hostile to the rights of trans people.

Jenny Lindsay, a prominent Scottish poet who only spoke up to oppose calls for violence directed at so-called TERFs, she became the object of such intense threats that the police counseled her to avoid public events for her own safety.

And Kathleen Stock, the philosophy professor whose essay This Is Not a Drill was shared by Rowling, who was advocating for academic freedom to debate these questions, even if her side turned out to be wrong, she became the object of fierce campus protests.

In 2021, a group of students formed to demand that Stock be fired.

This group started coming to campus with big signs, they were letting off flares, they were taking photos for this website that they'd started called Kathleen Stock as a TERF or something like that.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

The website's actually called Anti-TERF Sussex, and their mission statement reads in part, transphobes like Stock are anti-feminist, anti-queer, and anti-intellectual.

They are harmful and dangerous to trans people.

They're spiteful bootlickers.

They camouflage their transphobia in academic language, in fake feminism, and then we suffer the real material consequences of it.

We are not up for debate.

We cannot be reasoned out of existence.

We fucking had enough.

Our demand is simple.

Fire Kathleen Stock.

It's just crazy.

They just don't have a clue who I am.

And yet they were happy to stand there and try and get me out.

Stock, who is herself a lesbian, rejects the accusations that she is anti-queer or anti-trans.

But the protesters continued their campaign.

They put up posters all over campus saying things like,

Kathleen Stock makes trans students unsafe.

They graffitied the walls of nearby subway tunnels and underpasses with the simple, Stock Out.

After that, I was advised to stay at home and teach from home.

Ultimately, after nearly two decades at the University of Sussex,

Stock felt forced to resign.

The UK's Minister of Higher Education said,

It is absolutely appalling that the toxic environment at the University of Sussex has made it untenable for Professor Kathleen Stock to continue in her position there.

The sustained campaign of harassment and intimidation she has faced is deplorable and the situation should never have got this far.

I mean, it's an extension of the whole experience,

which is that you do feel alternating between feeling like you're going crazy, feeling anger, feeling total defeat,

and then also feeling all the feelings of shame and guilt and, you know, that they want you to feel.

Because to just suddenly have all fingers pointing at you,

you feel you can't help but take on the feelings that they want you to have for a bit.

You have to really defend yourself against it.

You have to remind yourself.

You have to keep going back to what you actually wrote.

And, you know, you almost expect there to be some terrible inflammatory language there or some terrible threat to somebody that somehow you didn't notice that you'd written.

But then you remind yourself, no, I just wrote this sort of relatively centrist, moderate, in the middle, compassionate thing.

So, yeah, it's really a psychological battle to stay strong

and not take on the projections that are coming at you in the moment.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

That's how it felt.
And I didn't always succeed.
What do you say to the people who say that's just accountability?
Look, I've heard this all the time.
We're holding you accountable.
We're holding you accountable.
Well, I would say this.
I'm a great believer in looking at not what people say, but what they do.
How are you behaving?
If you are threatening, if you are threatening to remove livelihoods,
if you are saying this person is cancelled, that is the language of a dictator.
I cancel you.
I obliterate you.
You are dead.
I mean, I've literally lost count of the numbers of times I've seen the hashtag
RIP, JK Rowling floating around.
But this isn't about me.
You know, clearly, I'm pretty resilient.
I don't call that being held accountable.
If you want to debate with me, I am absolutely open to that.
And I think I have proven that I'm very willing to engage on the ideas.
But I notice a remarkable disinclination to engage on the ideas.
The response is, well, we can't listen to you.
You are evil.
You must not be listened to.
That to me is intellectually incredibly cowardly.
I don't believe that any righteous movement behaves in such a way.
One of the reasons that many people are interested in what Rowling has done,
even if they've never read Harry Potter, even if they don't follow this debate
between some feminist and some trans rights activists,
is because this experience she's describing feels like it's become much more familiar
over the past decade.
When it comes to controversial issues, whether it's abortion or racism,
Brexit or Trump, vaccines or COVID school closures,
it's becoming much more common, not just for disagreement to be heated and fierce,
but for people to see anyone who doesn't share their view as evil.
For many onlookers, even ones who vehemently disagree with the questions and objections
that JK Rowling is raising,
she is highlighting a breakdown in the fabric of a pluralistic society.
One of my very dearest friends is a committed and practicing Catholic
and is also pro-life.
Now, I'm a feminist.
I'm pro-choice.
I understand exactly what his arguments are.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

And I respect his argument and he is prepared to make his argument.
I don't agree with his argument, but he respects my argument.
And we are both able to find shades of gray within our beliefs.
I think that is healthy.
I think that is productive.
I am not going to cut that person out of my life because we disagree on something,
albeit something that is very important to me.
We have lost that in this particular debate.
What do you say to the people who say that you,
maybe because of your experiences,
that you can't see that you've actually become
like the villains in your books,
that this fight you jumped into is a betrayal of some kind?
I suppose the thing I would say
above all to those who seek to tell me that I don't understand my own books,
I will say this,
some of you have not understood the books.
The death eaters claimed we have been made to live in secret
and now is our time.
And any who stand in our way must be destroyed.
If you disagree with us, you must die.
They demonized and dehumanized those who were not like them.
I am fighting what I see as a powerful, insidious, misogynistic movement
that I think has gained huge purchase in very influential areas of society.
I do not see this particular movement as either benign or powerless.
So I'm afraid I stand with the women who are fighting to be heard
against threat of loss of livelihood and threats their personal safety.
But as passionately as Rowling feels
and as much as the experience of speaking up
has served to confirm her feelings,
there are many Harry Potter fans,
especially transgender fans,
who feel that the threats and harassment she's received don't speak for them
and who bristle at the idea that their side is the side with power.
And some of these fans are still holding out hope
that Rowling will change her mind.
What would you want to say to JK Rowling?
I just kind of hope she could try to see
why so many trans people are angry and hurt by this.
I realize that that means asking for a second to like
leave her own position of feeling hurt and threatened.
But that's what she says that she wants to do.
And to me, what doing that would look like would be
understanding why people who are sort of being constantly rejected

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 5: The Tweets

and humiliated by our families, by the government,
who are either losing our access to healthcare or being threatened with it,
who are kind of just like fighting for a basic ability to participate in society.

Like why we might feel hurt and betrayed
by her sort of contributing to like fear about us.

That's, I guess, what I would say.

More next time.

You've been listening to The Witch Trials of JK Rowling,
produced by Andy Mills, Matthew Bull, and me, Megan Phelps-Roper,
and brought to you by The Free Press.

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