

I'm Barry Weiss, this is Honestly, and today we have a really special episode for you. It comes from our new series, The Witch Trials of JK Rowling.

If you haven't heard about it yet, though I really hope you have, it's a podcast featuring the most famous writer in the world about one of the most contentious issues of our time, sex and gender, and it's really about how hard it is to know if you're fighting for justice or joining a mob.

The series is hosted by free press writer Megan Phelps Roper, and a crazy thing happened. Megan wrote a letter to JK Rowling asking to interview her, and Rowling said yes.

Megan spent several days at her home in Edinburgh, and when she left, she spent the past few months speaking to dozens of people on all sides of this issue, trans adults, trans teenagers, doctors and advocates, historians including historians of witch trials, reporters, authors, Christians who boycotted Harry Potter in the 1990s, lawyers, and many more people all to try and understand what Rowling and other feminists like her believe, why their words have caused such a backlash, and what all of it says about our current moment, and more deeply what it says about human nature.

In a moment where black and white thinking abounds, the series is doing something different. For the course of seven episodes, it's giving us a chance to really hear people, not yell at them, hear them on all sides of this issue to hear where they're coming from and how their experiences of the world shape their sense of it and also of themselves.

That's what we think the show does so beautifully, and that's why we think it's especially perfect for anyone that listens to honestly.

We're going to take a quick break, and then you'll hear episode one of the witch trials of JK Rowling, stay with us.

Since you're listening to a podcast that's all about having thought-provoking discussions, may I assume that you enjoy thought-provoking discussions?

That's a pretty safe bet, so I'm recommending that honestly listeners also check out the Journal Sapir.

This is one of my favorite new publications, I get it four times a year, it's quarterly, and it's edited by my friend and New York Times columnist Brett Stevens.

Sapir is where you can read Leah Liebowitz's take on why current Israeli TV shows are so damn good.

It's where you can stream a conversation about cancel culture with the novelist Lionel Shriver, and where you can check out a debate on meritocracy with Harvard superstar professor Michael Sandel.

That's SapirJournal.org, that's S-A-P-I-R Journal.org, to explore all of their content, which takes thought-provoking to a whole new level.

And be on the lookout for Sapir's spring issue, which is all about Israel at 75.

Again, that's S-A-P-I-R Journal.org.

Hi loyal listeners, today's episode is brought to you by ExpressVPN.

You probably know by now that our big tech overlords grab your web history, your email metadata, and your video searches to create a detailed profile on you and then sell off that information to the highest bidder.

In other words, companies aren't just selling a product anymore, they're selling you.

To protect your identity and data, check out ExpressVPN.

I want you to think about all the websites you visit, Facebook, Twitter, Google.

You probably want to keep that information private.

That's where ExpressVPN comes in.

ExpressVPN makes you anonymous online by camouflaging your IP address and replacing it with a different

secure IP of your choice.

ExpressVPN also encrypts all of your data so that it's protected from hackers and anyone else trying to spy on you.

So if you're like me and you believe your internet data belongs to you and only you, protect your data with the number one rated VPN provider today.

Visit [expressvpn.com slash berry](https://expressvpn.com/slashberry) to get three months free on a one-year package.

[ExpressVPN.com slash berry](https://ExpressVPN.com/slashberry) to learn more.

The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek, Joseph Campbell.

Chapter one, plotted in darkness.

Hello there.

Sorry to bother you on making a podcast and I'm going to be asking a lot of fans a lot of questions all weekend and you're one of the people not staring at your phone.

So I thought maybe start with this film.

Sure.

How are you?

I'm good.

How are you?

I'm doing good.

For starters, why do you like Harry Potter?

I think I had not such a great childhood and I think a kid with not such a great childhood actually escaped to something else in a book.

It's a story about acceptance and love.

Harry Potter has been kind of like a beacon of hope in a lot of times in my life.

She teaches you the importance of friendships, the importance of forgiveness.

He felt like an outsider and he felt like he didn't belong and that really resonated with me.

The way people pull together, they're different, they don't all exactly agree with one another but they can say okay this is the common good and this is what we're going to work for.

What about the author?

What about J.K. Rowling?

That's a tricky question.

So there's a lot of controversy with that one.

I'm trying to stay out of it.

So I have a comment that I'll say off the thing.

J.K. Rowling is one of the most successful authors in the history of publishing and for the past 25 years, she's also been one of the most beloved.

Her books have taught tens of millions of children worldwide about virtues like loyalty and courage, about the inclusion of outsiders and the celebration of difference.

But in the summer of 2020, Rowling published a string of tweets about one of the most polarizing

subjects in society right now, sex and gender.

She waded into a conflict about transgender rights and the way she believed some activists were eroding hard-won rights for women.

There was an explosive reaction to Rowling's tweets, which led many, including lifelong fans of her work, to condemn her and to call for her books to be banned, boycotted and in some cases, burned.

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 promoting on her platform.

J.K. Rowling is literally putting trans lives at further risk.

She just is.

It's disgusting and it's problematic.

I mean, let's face it, Hermione would punch this woman in the face right now.

Harry Potter franchise is literally making this world unsafe for kids today.

Rowling was denounced by people she'd worked with for years, by staff at her publishers, and by human rights organizations that had once lauded her.

Actors who had grown up on the Harry Potter film sets, people she had known since they were children, distanced themselves from her.

Die Hard fans got their Harry Potter tattoos removed.

Some called for anyone supporting Rowling, even in small ways, to be fired from their jobs.

The condemnation moved to rallies, where Rowling became a symbol.

My name is Megan, and I spent the first 26 years of my life in a strict, fundamentalist Christian community.

The beliefs of my church were the complete embodiment of my identity and my worldview.

My family taught me that we were on a mission from God Himself, warning the world that they were going to hell if they didn't repent and live as we lived.

And I was a true believer, certain that I was 100% right, until I wasn't.

Ten years ago, even though I knew it would cost me almost every relationship I had, including with my parents, who I loved so much, I left.

I've spent the decades since investigating belief and how it compels us to act and identify, and how it colors and shapes the world we inhabit.

And reading Rowling's tweets, and then her transformation in the eyes of many who had loved her, it surprised me.

Because growing up, it was my community that thought JK Rowling was evil, and it was other Christian fundamentalists who had amassed and forced to condemn Rowling, and to call her work dangerous.

The Harry Potter books are mainstreaming witchcraft to our children.

They had denounced her.

They tried to ban Harry Potter from schools and libraries, and in some cases, they burned her books.

God hates this, I mean, he really hates it.

It's darkness, and he is light.

It is evil.

It's a stepping stone, kind of like marijuana leading to crack.

The little kids, they don't know the difference.

The adults do, and that's a shame on those parents that have their little kids read it.

When their kids commit suicide, I told them so.

They've been warned.

Despite its unparalleled popularity, Harry Potter is actually among the most banned books of the 21st century, and Rowling, even though she's inspired profound adoration throughout her career, with fans all over the planet, she's also been the subject of intense widespread and vocal backlashes from people whose politics could not be more at odds.

And for the past year, I've been trying to figure out why.

What is it about this woman and her work that has captured the ire of very different groups of people across time?

How did Rowling understand her critics?

And what did she think would happen when she sent those tweets?

And so I decided to write her a letter.

I explained who I was and what I was trying to understand, and then I sent it off to her in Scotland.

And to my surprise, I heard back.

I never set out to upset anyone.

However, I was not uncomfortable with getting off my pedestal.

And what has interested me over the last 10 years and certainly in the last few years, the last two, three years, particularly on social media, you've ruined your legacy.

Oh, you could have been beloved forever, but you chose to say this.

And I think you could not have misunderstood me more profoundly.

I do not walk around my house thinking about my legacy.

You know, what a pompous way to live your life walking around thinking what will my legacy be.

Whatever.

I'll be dead.

I care about now.

I care about the living.

After I left Rowling's home, I spoke to reporters and historians, transgender adults, teens and advocates, doctors and lawyers, and many of Rowling's critics, including some who supported bookbands.

And one of the things that stood out to me was how people on all sides of this conflict felt so under attack, so threatened that they invoked the language of witch hunts, even as they vehemently disagreed on who was the witch and who was the mob lighting the fire.

I'm Megan Phelps-Roper, and these are the witch trials of J.K. Rowling.

Great.

Well, if you guys have water, if you sound good, I'm going to put on these headphones.

Shall we close that door?

It might need to be locked, actually.

Last summer, J.K. Rowling invited me to her 16th century stone house, where she lives

with her husband, her younger children, and two dogs.

Later, I would Google the place and learn that it's technically a castle, which, from the outside, makes sense, but inside it felt smaller, cozy even.

The rooms were not high vaulted in lofty but snug and homey.

Think more hobbits in the shire, less princess in a tower.

Rowling was also smaller in real life than I would have guessed.

She showed my producer and me into her drawing room, filled with books that she'd color-coordinated

into a rainbow over the pandemic lockdown.

And it was here that we would sit together, over the course of the next few days, and talk.

You have big deep breaths.

Yoga move.

All right.

Let's do it.

Okay, so I want to start with a big question.

Why do you think we humans, especially young kids, why do we like stories about witches and wizards and giants and dark magic?

What is it about us, and what is it about magic and magical worlds that we find so compelling?

I'm very interested in this because I think it speaks to something very profound in human nature.

Magic gives a person agency they wouldn't otherwise have, and I think that's particularly appealing to a child because children inevitably are quite powerless.

Even children in happy families are relatively powerless.

And the idea that you have secret power, extraordinary power, supernatural power, I think is hugely seductive to all of us, to adults as well, but particularly to children.

I want to go back to the early days, and I know you've talked about this period in your life so much over the years, this time just before Harry Potter was published.

But I also know that our stories aren't static.

They shift over time with the benefit of hindsight and new experiences and just where you are in life when you're telling the story again.

I know exactly what you mean.

You're right.

I've been asked a million times about the moment when I had the idea on the train, and I've said it so many times, but you do look back and suddenly you stumble into this little pool of self-knowledge or memory that can be so illuminating.

So I had the idea for Potter on a train when I was 25.

Why did that idea come?

I've never really known.

It just fell into my head, and I immediately thought, I've got to write that.

God, I love that idea.

The funny thing is, I was never a great reader of fantasy.

The thing that interests me most is human nature, above anything else.

Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly

normal.

Thank you very much.

They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

But there was something about this particular story.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age.

Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes.

He wore round glasses, held together with a lot of scotch tape.

This boy, who was unhappy and without any power, suddenly realising what he had and who he was.

The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a lightning bolt.

He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could remember asking his aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it.

Can you take me back to your life in the 1990s?

I've heard you describe that time as essentially your greatest fear come to life.

Yeah.

The early 90s for me were not good.

I was in a real period of flux at the time.

My mother was very ill.

I had moved from London to Manchester.

And then my mother died actually on the night of December the 30th, 1990, but I didn't realise she died until the early hours of New Year's Eve.

She was 45.

She'd been ill for a very long time, but none of us realised death was imminent.

That kind of took a wrecking wall to my life really.

To me, this decade now was infused with loss, and I think, you know, perhaps that would have coloured my feelings about the story I was writing, perhaps that would have made me want to put it away forever.

But in fact, that sense of loss and this real despair that I felt started to go into the story.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

Mum, he whispered, dad.

At that point, the story changed.

Suddenly everything darkened and deepened.

They just looked at him, smiling.

And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobbly knees.

The story that Rowling had begun to write on the train that day was about an orphan boy.

I slightly glibly used the trope for six months before my mother died.

In reality, of course, is a tragedy to be an orphan.

This fictional orphan, Harry Potter, was abused and neglected and never told about who he

really is, who his parents really were, or how they had died to save him.
And now I really understood what loss was.
Harry was looking at his family for the first time in his life.
The Potters smiled and waved at Harry, and he stared hungrily back at them.
His hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them.
He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.
This little manuscript that only I knew this story, no one else had seen it.
I hadn't spoken about it really to anyone else.
I know this was the thing that I just clutched on to as I went off on my journeys.
In 1991, at the age of 25, Rowling broke up with her boyfriend, quit her job, and she left the UK.
I decided I need to get away.
She got a job teaching English as a foreign language.
I went abroad.
I knew that I liked teaching, and so I thought I'm just going to go away.
I'm going to take a year out, I'll teach.
I don't really know why, but I chose to go to Portugal.
And initially, it did the job.
I'm away.
I'm in a different environment.
This is helping me.
But I think that emotionally, I was still incredibly vulnerable.
Well, in fact, I know I was emotionally vulnerable.
So while there was a lot of fun and there was relief in not being surrounded by the familiar, I was pretty lost and pretending not to be lost.
Still grieving, unsure of what her future held, Rowling says she tried to put on a good face and move forward.
And pretty soon, she met someone.
So you go to Portugal and you meet a guy?
I did.
I met a guy.
I think I'd been there six months, maybe, in a bar with my friends, good-looking guy, told me he was a journalist.
We began dating.
It was OK.
It was OK.
I'd lost my moorings, and I was drifting along in something that wasn't perfect, but it was good to be wanted.
It was good to have affection, but I was kind of adrift.
The months went by, and eventually, they decided to move into an apartment together.
A year came, and it went.
And then I became pregnant accidentally, and while pregnant, he proposed to me.
And then I lost the baby.

I miscarried, which was hugely traumatic.

It was traumatic physically, and it was traumatic emotionally.

And that was another massive loss.

And I think at that point, I really was in a very...

I was certainly not in a balanced state of mind.

And when I lost the baby, I do remember having a moment in my grief for the baby.

I do remember having a moment where I thought, so we're not going to get married.

That's clear, right?

And I'm almost speaking to myself, that's clear, Joe, we're not going to marry this guy, but he was putting huge pressure on me to get married.

So I went through with it, and then became pregnant, almost immediately we were married, which is a joyful thing, because I cannot imagine a world without my Jessica in it.

So in with all the bad, there was an amazing, wonderful thing came out of it, and that was my daughter.

And as I understand it, even before your daughter was born, your husband had become increasingly abusive.

Yeah, the situation was a bad situation, but until you actually go through it, you don't know what you would choose to do.

Rolling says she tried to end things.

I left him twice before I left for good, and then I went back twice.

But it just got worse from there.

The marriage at this point has turned very violent and very controlling.

At this point, he's searching my handbag every time I come home.

I haven't got a key to my own front door, because he's got to control the front door.

And I think he's not a stupid person.

I think he knew or suspected that I was going to try and bolt again.

It was a horrible state of tension to live in, because you have to act.

And I don't think I'm a very good actor.

I don't have a very good poker face.

And that was a huge strain to act as though I wasn't going.

That's a terrible way to live.

And yet the manuscript kept growing.

I'd continued to write.

In fact, he knew what that manuscript meant to me, because at a point he took the manuscript and hid it, and that was his hostage.

Oh my God.

When I realized that I was definitely going to go, this was it, I was definitely going,

I would take a few pages of the manuscript into work every day, just a few pages so he wouldn't realize anything was missing and I would photocopy it.

And gradually in a cupboard in the staff room, bit by bit, a photocopied manuscript grew and grew and grew, because I suspected that if I wasn't able to get out with everything, he would burn it or take it or hold it hostage.

That manuscript still meant so much to me.

That was the thing that actually I prioritized saving.

The only thing I prioritized beyond that obviously was my daughter, but at that point she's still inside me, so she's as safe as she can be in that situation.

In July of 1993, Rowling gave birth to a baby girl and named her Jessica, after one of her favorite writers, Jessica Mitford.

She says it was this experience of motherhood that would ultimately push her to the point where she had to make a change.

I do remember thinking very clearly, and that was probably at the moment I knew I had to leave about a month before I did leave, she's not going to grow up and watch this happening to her mother, she's not going to grow up and think that this is normal or okay.

So she started mapping out a way to get to her sister, who lived in Scotland.

I'd been planning a kind of orderly withdrawal, I'd been trying to set things up so I get my daughter out, everything's smooth, everything is arranged.

But then there came a night, I don't even know what triggered it, and this was probably about a week before I planned to make my exit.

There came a night where he became very angry with me, and I cracked, and I said, I want to go, I want to leave.

And he became very violent, and he said, if you're leaving, you can leave, but you're not getting Jessica, I'm keeping her, I will hide her.

So I put up a fight, and I paid the price, there was a very loud and a violent scene which terminated with me lying in the street.

And then I thought right, I'm going to the police, and I went to the police, and I was assessed, and I was agreed that I clearly had just been beaten up, I was pretty bruised, and I filed a complaint, and the next day went back to the house with the police and got Jessica back.

Sitting where you are today is one of the most powerful, influential women in the world.

It almost seems like you're describing a different person, you are a person without a key to your own flat, and you're being physically abused and beaten up and smuggling out, plotting an escape.

But the thing is, I am still that person, you see.

To me, the through line is very clear.

Nothing in her daughter moved from Portugal to Edinburgh, Scotland, with just a couple of suitcases and next to nothing in her bank account, she was starting over, again.

When you moved back to the UK, what did your life look like?

Well, I'm not going to say it was as slow as you can go, because it wasn't.

I had very kind people who helped me.

I could go stay with my sister, which was obviously not the case for some people who find themselves in my situation, and I think I spent two, three weeks with my sister, and then I moved into my own place, which was really a glorified bed-sit.

Wait, a glorified what?

Bed-sit.

Do you not have that phrase?

What is that phrase?

I mean, it's like a room and a half.

So my first flat was like, there was a bathroom, but the kitchen and pretty much everything

else is together.

Okay.

Like a studio apartment is.

Okay.

But that sounds so much more glamorous than bed-sit.

And I called Jessica Decker, so Decker and I were sharing a bedroom.

Rolling said she was even more adrift than when she left the UK years before.

She was divorced, broke, a single mother, and she had just enrolled in a teacher training program in hopes of eventually getting a job at a local school.

But I was living on benefits, which you would call welfare, obviously, and I was at this point, my mental health was not good.

I'd never lived in Scotland, although I have Scottish ancestry.

I was really here because my sister was here.

She felt isolated.

She was questioning her worth.

She didn't have her mother there to help her become a mother.

She says that she was losing herself.

I was dissociating, I was losing time, I definitely had suicidal thoughts.

I was in a very dark, shaky place.

And yet it was this darkness getting this low that she now is almost grateful for.

It stripped away the inessential.

It showed me even though I was a mess, candidly, I was a mess.

I had this daughter that I loved beyond anything in my life.

It was love like as I'd never experienced before, and that was so powerful.

And I do remember continuing to work on that story.

I spent 17 years working on Potter, and there are things I understand in that story that no one else can possibly understand, and which I stayed true to, even as my own life improved and my own state of mind became healthier, I was still very committed to those parts that I'd plotted in darkness as it were, because there was a truth to them, and there was a power to them.

But you must know who your mum and dad were, he said.

I mean, they were famous.

You're famous.

What?

Said Harry.

My mum and dad, well, famous, were they?

You don't know.

Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.

You don't know who you are.

I could have no idea what was going to come.

A quick break, and then more from the witch trials of JK Rowling.

If you're a small business owner, the first thing you need is a day off.

The last thing you need is to get sued for an HR violation.

Bambi is an HR platform built for small businesses, so you can automate the most important HR

practices and get your own dedicated HR manager without making a separate hire. First, Bambi's HR autopilot automates your core policies, workplace training, and employee feedback.

Then, your dedicated HR manager will help you navigate the more complex parts of HR and guide you to compliance.

They're available by phone, email, or real-time chat.

An in-house HR manager can cost up to \$80,000 a year, but with Bambi, your dedicated US-based HR manager starts at just \$99 a month.

They're experienced in supporting small businesses and understand legal nuances in all 50 states. The best part is that there's no hidden fees and you can cancel at any time.

You run your business, let Bambi run your HR, go to Bambi.com and type in Honestly under podcast when you sign up.

That's B-A-M-B-E-E.com and type in Honestly.

My favorite new publication is the Journal Sapir, a publication featuring bold, unapologetic Jewish voices and edited by my friend and New York Times columnist, Brett Stevens.

Sapir shares ideas about how to create a thriving Jewish future in its quarterly issues with themes like culture, education, and more.

But did you know that Sapir also hosts events?

This month, you can hear featured voices from the issue on culture, discussing their articles and diving deeper into the urgent and challenging topics of today.

Visit SapirJournal.org, that's S-A-P-I-R-Journal.org to register for upcoming interviews with John Podhoritz on the evolution of Jewish cool, novelist Allegra Goodman on what it means to be a Jewish writer today, and Ruchel Kafrisen on why you need more Giddish in your life. You can also catch up on previous events with Sapir's YouTube channel or by searching for Sapir Conversations on your favorite podcast platform.

Again, that's S-A-P-I-R-J-O-U-R-N-A-L.org.

A part of the folklore around Harry Potter, which turns out to be true, is that originally the first book was rejected by 12 different publishers before finally someone was willing to put it out.

Nobody wants to be with the Zeitgeist, which is, you know, a business decision.

I think sometimes they make mistakes, and what they think is the Zeitgeist is a very particular and narrow view of the Zeitgeist, but that's another discussion.

The people who reject it, it should be fired, obviously.

This is Charles, a.k.a. Chip.

My name is Chip McGrath.

I'm the former editor of the New York Times book review.

Formerly the head of the biggest books department in publishing.

I'm going to say 1995 to 2004.

So this is right when Harry Potter blew up.

Yeah.

Nobody anticipated that it was going to do as well as it did.

And this is Cat.

So my name's Cat Rosenfield.

I'm a culture writer and the author of five books, including two young adult novels.

Even after Rowling was finally able to get a publisher.
When it was first purchased, it was not anticipated to be a particularly big book.
They only printed 500 copies.
The publishers, both the ones that rejected the book and the one that finally agreed to put it out, they just felt like it wasn't of the moment.
I think there were three things going on with the book.
Firstly, boarding school, passe, no one's going to be interested.
Secondly, it's too long.
So the first one's 95,000 words, and I can't even remember how long Phoenix is, order of the Phoenix, but little did they know what was coming.
And then thirdly, I don't think it was necessarily, it might have been that he was a boy.
One of the issues was about gender.
In particular, the fact that Rowling was a woman.
So then they want me to not use my first name.
They want me to use my initials.
They were concerned that a woman's name on the front of the book would discourage boys from wanting to read it.
This has always been a concern in publishing.
How do we get boys to read?
And so this pen name, JK Rowling, was selected at the behest of the publishers.
Joanne Rowling doesn't even have a middle name.
The famous JK was made up just for the books.
There was an understanding, I think, at this point that the novel was going to have limited appeal already.
So this was a way of trying to attract more readers, choosing a gender-neutral name.
In 1997, the 500 copies of the book were distributed to bookstores and libraries.
The first time I saw the book in a bookshop, now that to me was a bigger deal than I can express to you.
I am a published writer.
Look, there it is.
Do you remember where you first saw it in a shop?
I remember vividly.
It's actually not there anymore.
It was a Waterstones mainstream book outlet, and I genuinely didn't go in there to look for it.
I went in there to buy a picture book for my daughter.
And I turned and I looked at the R section of the, you know, the chapter books.
And I was, as I thought, it will be there.
I saw it.
It's a completely unknown book.
There's no fanfare.
There was no big launch party.
That's normal.
Even in the window.

No, of course not.

It's just quietly appeared on the shelf.

And it was one of the best moments of my life.

It was the most incredible feeling.

There was very little marketing budget, but it became clear fairly early on that children were telling children about the book.

It's like a chain reaction.

Everybody gets involved with that.

In my class, like, you didn't read Harry Potter.

You liked Two Days Later.

It was so good, wasn't it?

It was word of mouth.

It started to get bigger and bigger.

It's very different.

It's not like a normal average book.

It's like so imaginative.

It's so detailed.

It's almost like watching the book instead of reading it.

Quickly, those 500 copies they originally printed became 30,000 copies.

And then in less than a year, Scholastic Books, one of the biggest publishers in the US, picked out the book.

And suddenly, if you don't know it, your children almost certainly do.

It was everywhere.

A little boy named Harry Potter is working magic in the world of books.

Harry Potter is an old fashioned, good triumphs over evil story, but full of quirks and surprises.

This idea of an orphan boy, abused, neglected, unwanted, who suddenly gets a mysterious letter telling him there's a whole other world out there, with a place for him in it.

This idea that in this other world, full of adventure and danger, giants and dragons, good and evil, he'll find his friends, his identity, his courage to do great things.

This idea that Rowling came up with on the train in 1990, it just profoundly connected with so many people.

And as its success grew, Rowling's own life started to become part of the story.

Joanne Rowling, a 34-year-old single mother and currently the world's most successful author, lives and writes in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle in Scotland.

I mean, she is the subject then of this sort of mythologizing.

And while she thought of herself as a writer, she had never published anything.

I mean, her story is in a way, it's like a Harry Potter story itself.

It's a kind of a fairy tale.

Jo Rowling's rise to success is this sort of feminist Cinderella story.

What makes Jo Rowling's success all the more remarkable is what it followed.

She had few friends and fewer prospects and ended up on welfare, actually skipping meals to make sure she had enough money for her four-month-old baby.

You have a single mom on welfare who writes this book that changes the course of the culture.

Her agent says that Rowling, barely five years away from welfare, could end up making one

hundred million dollars.

This idea of a woman doing it on her own.

I was so ill-equipped for what happened to me.

Now, I was grateful, I was hugely grateful that the work was loved.

That part brought me nothing but joy.

And materially speaking, I mean, my life had been transformed.

At that point, I was living for the first time I'd been able to buy a house, but I was scared.

What was happening to me in terms of fame was outstripping me constantly.

So I buy this very ordinary house that's standing on a nice ordinary street and I've got journalists parked outside my front door, they're within feet of my front door.

So I felt like I was playing catch-up all the time with the situation.

And I wasn't- It was changing faster than you could respond to it.

It was changing far faster than I could deal with.

And all the time, I have this lurking fear because I know that there's someone out there who does not wish me well.

So that was strange.

And then, well, to tell you the truth, the reason we left that first place was my ex-husband arrived and broke in.

Oh, my God.

Yeah.

So moving became quite a pressing issue at that point.

In the middle of all of this, you're still worried, you have not escaped your husband.

This is the insanity of it.

I'm trying to retain like an iron wall around my location as well because everyone wants to come.

Can I photograph you at home?

No, you can't photograph me at home.

Why not?

You're being so precious.

You're being so starry.

And it's not that at all.

It was quite the reverse.

It's because the last time my ex-husband knew my address, he turned up and broke in.

What was that like to me?

You're this rising star and you're still trying to hide.

I think that's actually the most accurate summary of my situation I've ever heard.

Try and reconcile, suddenly having a lot of press interest with really, really wanting to live under the radar for very concrete reasons.

Not because I thought I was a salinger, not because I'm Greta Garbo, but because they're on safety.

Yeah.

I was living in a state of real tension that I couldn't express to many people.

And yet, with the release of each new book, The Harry Potter Phenomenon, broke new records.

There were midnight release parties where, all over the world, thousands of people lined up or camped out all night.

At midnight, less than one hour from now, the new Harry Potter book goes on sale here in Southern California.

Potter fans in other cities like London, where children actually slept outside bookstores overnight when the latest in the series was going on sale.

I mean, the thing about the Potter thing was it went on and on and on.

I mean, it was a publishing whirlwind.

It's unprecedented in American children's books.

It's unprecedented in English children's books.

There's nothing that compares to the velocity of the success of Harry Potter.

And it's not just kids.

Adults are into Harry Potter, too.

Well, I started out buying them for my grandson, who's very young.

And then I started reading them, and I liked them so well I kept going.

You really feel you know this, this character.

It was increasingly difficult to describe how big it was.

This is really nothing that can be compared to a normal success.

People kept trying to kind of outdo themselves in terms of their superlative language.

The largest printing of a book ever, the fastest selling book ever.

It was somebody is picking up Harry Potter every 30 seconds.

The books are now in 26 languages and 140 countries.

The Potter books are available in 200 countries and translated into 46 languages.

It was really insane.

As we crossed over into the year 2000, suddenly everything seemed to just supersize itself.

Everything from my point of view became a bit more crazy.

It all became so much that it started to seem like too much.

JK Rowling had created an uncanny world, and the phenomenon that surrounded it was itself becoming uncanny.

I was signing for like 2000 people at a time.

You've got fights breaking out in the car park.

You've got security there.

Just the enormity of it brought this tension.

There is something about a mass of human beings.

There's always an edge in a crowd always.

And in 2000, at a big crowded book signing, we had a bomb threat at one store from allegedly a far-right Christian person.

It was clear by this time that there was a mounting backlash to Harry Potter.

As we approach the 21st century, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize that our entire culture is in trouble.

We're staring down the barrel of a loaded gun, and we can no longer afford to act like it's loaded with blanks.

And a movement was growing to stop Rowling and ban her books.

Things are getting a little bit nervy at this point, you know.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Honestly Presents: The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling

Here in a moral freefall, when your children can be taught witchcraft by Harry Potter, that Heather has two mummies, you can let your daughter go to school and she can get an abortion without your permission or without your knowledge.

Something is dreadfully wrong when you, as the parent, cannot control the destiny of your own child.

America has turned its back on the God of the Bible, and it's time for the Church of Jesus Christ to stand up and speak up and say, we have a right to the destiny of our own children.

Thanks as always for listening.

If you like what you heard and you want to hear more, go to wherever you get your podcasts, Stitcher, Apple, Spotify, wherever, it's everywhere, and subscribe to the Witch Trials of JK Rowling.

You can hear the first four episodes out now.

And if you want to support Honestly, the best and only way to do that is by going to thefp.com, t-h-e-f-p.com, and becoming a subscriber today.

We'll see you next time.