Episode Book

EPISODE #5778

How J.K. Rowling Builds Characters That Last

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SYNOPSIS

How does a writer keep dozens of characters vivid across seven books and two very different fictional worlds? This episode digs into J.K. Rowling's actual creative machinery — the two handwritten notebooks from the early nineties, the "Original Forty" class list with houses and parentage marked before the first book was finished, and the color-coded spreadsheets she still uses to track master files on every character. Along the way: where the names come from (medieval saints, maps, a war memorial), why the Dementors work on adults, and what the Robert Galbraith pseudonym reveals about running two invented worlds at once — including the thank-you letters she wrote in a dead man's handwriting.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Picture the scene: two brothers host a podcast about their own character prompts. Somewhere in Jerusalem, a friend sends in a prompt about J.K. Rowling. And now here we are.



Herman

Here we are.



Corn

Daniel's the friend in question, and he's picking up a thread from an episode we did about building character prompts for the two of us. He mentioned his background is mostly journalism, factual and technical writing, and he's always been curious how fiction writers manage long-running characters, because character depth is one of those subtle things that can make or break a series that runs for years.



Herman

He's not wrong about that.



Corn

Then he narrowed it to one writer: J.K. Rowling. He wants her background, but mostly her creative process, the machinery behind the Harry Potter world and the Cormoran Strike series, which he's a big fan of. What interests him is that those are two very different kinds of invented space. Harry Potter defies the natural order outright. Strike plants you in a real London and still has to make its people feel as vivid as anything in a fantasy.



Herman

Which is harder than it sounds.



Corn

And then the part he's really circling. He's heard fiction writers develop something like pseudo-relationships with their characters, not imaginary constructs but living parts of the creative process that need tending like any relationship. He wants to know how Rowling handles that, and whether writers run several fictional worlds at once or one at a time, because holding different imaginary worlds in your head all at once sounds, in his words, like a very challenging mental task.



Herman

It does. And she's answered most of that directly, which is unusual. Most of what writers say about process is fog. Rowling has gone on the record about the rooms, the spreadsheets, the bereavement. We can actually work with it.



Corn

So where does she start?



Herman

Yate, Gloucestershire. Born the thirty-first of July, nineteen sixty-five, Joanne Rowling. Father Peter, mother Anne, and the two of them met on a train, King's Cross to Arbroath, which is a strange detail to have in common with your own most famous train.



Corn

The woman could not escape the railway if she tried.



Herman

She wrote her first story at six. It was about a rabbit called Rabbit.



Corn

A title that tells you everything and nothing.



Herman

The naming instinct was already there. At eleven she wrote a novel about seven cursed diamonds. Then Exeter, French and Classics, a year in Paris. Amnesty International as a researcher, she describes herself as terminally disorganised there, then teaching English in Portugal and French in Scotland. All of that is the standard biography and none of it explains the thing that actually matters, which is nineteen ninety, a delayed train from Manchester to London.



Corn

Delayed. Of course it was delayed. That's the only reason any of us have anything.



Herman

Her words are that the idea just fell out of nowhere and it was the purest stroke of inspiration she's ever had in her life. She had no pen on her, so she just sat there imagining it, building it in her head for the length of the delay.



Corn

And then the part I find remarkable, and it's the part Daniel's going to care about most: she spent five years writing about Harry before anyone read a word of it. Five years.



Herman

Her line is that she spent so long constructing the world, and that it's embarrassing how many trees died for her, because she writes everything down.



Corn

That's not a hobbyist with a good idea. That's somebody who treated the story as infrastructure before it was a story.



Herman

And she has the artifacts to prove it. Two notebooks, bought in an art gallery in the early nineties, and they contain spell names, doodles, old Portuguese phone numbers she never crossed out, and dialogue that made it into Philosopher's Stone word for word.



Corn

Portuguese phone numbers in the notebook that built Hogwarts.



Herman

Only three people have ever seen them.



Corn

Three people. Which means somewhere out there, two people know what the fourth person doesn't.



Herman

And then the one that I'd hold up as the single best piece of evidence for how she builds characters at scale. She's got a page in those notes that everyone calls the Original Forty. Forty classmates, listed before the first book was finished, each one with a house and a parentage symbol next to the name. Pureblood, half-blood, Muggle-born, marked next to people who mostly never make it into a scene.



Corn

Forty. How many of those forty survive to the page in any meaningful way?



Herman

Barely a dozen, and that's being generous. But one of them was Neville Longbottom. She's said he developed into a very important character off that list.



Corn

Three words on a page and the whole arc is latent in it. Slow work.



Herman

Something like thirty years of slow work, if you count the fallout.



Corn

The names. I want the names, because that's where you can see her reaching outside the desk.



Herman

Medieval saints, maps, dictionaries, plants, war memorials, people she's met. Snape and Dursley both come off maps, so both of them are places in England you can go and stand in. Hedwig comes from the saints. Gilderoy Lockhart's surname is lifted off a war memorial.



Corn

A name off a war memorial, and it belongs to a man whose entire personality is the misuse of other people's courage.



Herman

And Dumbledore is an old English word for bumble bee. She picked it because she imagined him wandering the castle humming to himself.



Corn

The most powerful wizard alive, named for the buzzing noise he makes when he's happy.



Herman

The one I'd put in front of anybody who says the names are just whimsy. Dementors. She's said they embody depression, which she's suffered from, and that the look of them came from a nightmare she had as a child, a creature that looked like a dementor, the empty black cloak and the withered hand.



Corn

So the most frightening thing in a children's series is a diagnosis with a body.



Herman

And it's the reason they work on adults and frighten children. Children don't know what clinical depression is. They know the feeling of the cloak.



Corn

I want to stay on that for a second, because it's the cleanest example of the thing Daniel's asking about. She didn't sit down and design a monster. She reached for something she already carried, gave it a shape, and then gave it a rule set — the cold, the despair, the way they feed on happiness. That's a character built outward from a private feeling.



Herman

Which is exactly why it can't be copied. You can lift the cloak. You can't lift the nightmare.



Corn

And once the world exists at that level of specificity, the actual writing has to be managed somehow. What does she say about the mechanics?



Herman

She says she often starts with a kernel and then works out how to get there, plans and researches heavily, and knows far more about the characters than ever reaches the page. Then the line that would disappoint anyone who wants it to be all café notebooks and candlelight: colour-coded spreadsheets.



Corn

Colour-coded.



Herman

And it was the same for the Potter books.



Corn

So the notebooks were the raw ore and the spreadsheet was the refinery. That's the part I keep landing on. Every writer tells you about the notebooks, because the notebooks are the romance. Nobody tells you about the cell shading.



Herman

And the present-day version is a laptop. She plans novels on laptop spreadsheets now, and she keeps what she calls master files on all her different characters, with huge amounts of background, purely to keep herself orientated.



Corn

Orientated. She needs a file to find her way around her own head.



Herman

That's the point I'd underline for Daniel, actually. If the master file exists, then the character exists independently enough that she has to go and look things up. You don't keep a file on something you still hold entirely in your skull.



Corn

Right. The files are the proof that the people have taken up residence somewhere other than memory.



Herman

Which brings us to the pseudonym, and this is where Daniel's two-worlds question actually starts.



Corn

Robert Galbraith. Hannah told him about that, apparently.



Herman

She told him right. The Cuckoo's Calling comes out, it's a debut crime novel by a former military policeman turned novelist, and it's reviewed as a decent first book by a man who clearly knows his stuff.



Corn

And it was her the whole time.



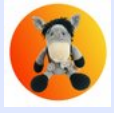
Herman

Her stated reason: she wanted to go back to the beginning of a writing career in this new genre, to work without hype or expectation and receive totally unvarnished feedback. She wanted it to be just about the writing. Her line is that being Robert Galbraith was all about the work, which is her favourite part of being a writer.



Corn

She wanted the rejection letters.



Herman

She said she wanted to go back to getting an honest rejection letter. And she hoped to publish three books before anyone unmasked her.



Corn

How far did she get?



Herman

One and a bit. The second book was out and doing well when the story broke. And the detail I love is that she wrote thank-you letters to reviewers, Val McDermid and James Patterson among them, in Robert's fake handwriting. And then after she was rumbled, she had to rewrite them in her real handwriting.



Corn

A grown woman practising a dead man's handwriting in order to say thank you without being caught. That's not a marketing plan. That's a commitment to the bit that borders on the pathological.



Herman

The name construction is deliberate too. Robert for Kennedy, who she's described as her hero. Galbraith from a childhood wish to be called Ella Galbraith. And the choice of a male name was, in her words, to take her writing persona as far away from herself as possible.



Corn

She's not just hiding. She's building a firewall.



Herman

And there's a second reason that only came out later. She's since said part of the motivation was fear of her abusive first ex-husband, against whom she had a restraining order.



Corn

That reframes the whole pseudonym conversation. It's easy to hear the story as a clever literary stunt. It wasn't only that. It was cover.



Herman

Which is also true of the K, in a smaller way. The K stands for Kathleen, her paternal grandmother's name, and it was added at the publisher's request because they thought initials would appeal more to boys.



Corn

A publisher's marketing note that has followed her for thirty years. Every byline is a negotiation with somebody.



Herman

And it kept going. She's said a lot of writers would give anything for what she has, and she's not complaining, but the initial reason for Galbraith was that she was tired of being the phenomenon rather than the writer. Hannah knew about it before Daniel did, so credit to Hannah.



Corn

Hannah's the one who brought the Strike series into the house. What's the actual research cost on those books?



Herman

Career of Evil is the one. She read Ted Bundy's own accounts and studied real killers, Jerry Brudos and Russell Williams, and she says the research gave her literal nightmares. And she drew a line on the page: the violence was not to become what she called violence porn. Her words were that these are not pieces of meat and not mannequins to be dismembered.



Corn

So the woman who wrote a childhood nightmare into the Dementors then went and read a serial killer's own words and had to have a rule about how far the page could go.



Herman

And that's the answer to one of the misconceptions Daniel's prompt runs into: the idea that the real-world setting is the easier one. The fantasy world cost her five years of construction. The real world cost her sleep.



Corn

Both are work. One is architect's work and one is forensics.



Herman

That's the trade. Harry Potter, she made the rules. Strike, the rules are already made, and one of them is that the villain has to be a man who actually existed.



Corn

Right. But this is the part of the episode where I have to be honest about the source material, because Daniel's question has an assumption buried in it, and the assumption is smarter than most of what you read about this.



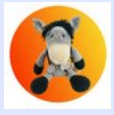
Herman

Go on.



Corn

The pseudo-relationship claim. He said he's heard fiction writers develop something like relationships with their characters, treating them as living parts of the process rather than imaginary constructs. That framing is his, and I think he'd be the first to admit it.



Herman

He would. And here's the honest version of what she's actually said, because we can quote her directly on almost all of it. The rooms metaphor, which is her best answer to his multi-world question. She says she's never had any problem moving between fictional worlds, even while working on them at the same time. She imagines the different fictional worlds as different rooms she has access to, separate places in her head, and she says



Herman (continued)

the moment she re-enters one of the worlds, the characters are as fully real to her as when she left them.



Corn

As fully real as when she left them. That's a re-entry claim, not a relationship claim.



Herman

She also says Strike was entirely imaginary, a very vivid character who came to her the best way, and quotes are that he just walked into my head. Robin is, in her words, the most purely loveable character she's written.



Corn

So, evidence of presence, yes. Evidence of nurturing, no.



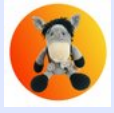
Herman

And then the bereavement claim, which is the strongest thing we've got. When she finished Harry Potter she told her husband Neil that it felt like a bereavement, and she's said she lived a huge amount of her life in that world in a way no one else can, and that it was a place she was escaping into.



Corn

Escaping into. That's a room, not a marriage.



Herman

And she predicts the same feeling when she finishes the Galbraith books, because she says it's been pure joy from start to finish.



Corn

So my read of the evidence, and I'd put it back to Daniel this way: she never describes the characters as creatures she has to tend. She describes them as real, and she describes leaving as a death. That's a place and a loss. The word relationship is doing something the evidence doesn't quite support. But the emotional weight is real, whatever you call it.



Herman

I'd push it one step further than that. The relationship framing is borrowed from how writers talk about long-form television and serial characters, and it's a useful frame because it captures the obligation. You can't abandon a person you've built and then walked away from. But even that suggests a bilateral thing, and what she's describing is unilateral. The character is real to her. Nobody's asking her how her day was.



Corn

They can't. She's the one who has to keep the appointments.



Herman

Which is what the master files are, in a way. The appointments.



Corn

And the concurrency question, which is the one I think Daniel's actually most curious about. Inhabiting several invented worlds at once.



Herman

Her direct claim is that she's never had trouble moving between them, even working on them at the same time, and the rooms are separate in her head. Then the actual record: she wrote The Cuckoo's Calling before The Casual Vacancy, and she's said that for a time she was writing both of them sort of at the same time.



Corn

Sort of. She said sort of.



Herman

Which is doing exactly the amount of work you want it to. And here's what the record does not show: we cannot find anywhere she says she runs Potter and Strike in parallel now. He wants to know whether writers do two worlds concurrently, and the honest answer, at least in her case, is that she did it once and has described it as the exception rather than the method. When she says it was the same spreadsheets for both series, she's talking about method, not simultaneous drafting.



Corn

That's the part of the picture where the archive is thinner than the legend.



Herman

Hence the honest read. The rooms are real, the doors work, and she has never described routinely walking through two of them in the same afternoon.



Corn

There's one more thing here and I think it's the thing Daniel would find most useful, if he's trying to build a character prompt from this. The blocking.



Herman

Writer's block. She's said she hit it once, exactly once, a week of freezing on book two.



Corn

And the reason.



Herman

Book one overshot her wildest expectations.



Corn

That's a spectacular reason to lock up. You get what you wanted, twice over, and the machine stops because now the stakes are real.



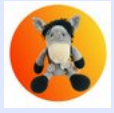
Herman

And that's the scale of a career where the failure mode isn't running out of ideas. It's being answered too well.



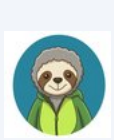
Corn

But I want to go back to something you said earlier, because I think it's the spine of what Daniel's really asking. He builds character prompts for a living, in a sense, for the two of us. And Rowling's model says that the depth doesn't come from the plan. It comes from knowing far more than will ever reach the page.



Herman

Which is the opposite of how a lot of people write. The instinct is to put everything you know into the first scene. She does the reverse. She builds forty classmates and shows you the ones who earn it.



Corn

Forty classmates and the story is in the forty-first edition of the spreadsheet.



Herman

Over six hundred million copies sold worldwide and eighty-five languages, and the file structure is still the interesting part.



Corn

There's one more corner of this I want to get to before Hilbert weighs in, because I think it's the answer to the thing Daniel's least sure about. The fear.



Herman

Say it.



Corn

His prompt says he's always been a factual writer. He's never had to spend ten years with a person he invented. But he's asking about the emotional strength of the attachment, and everything we've pulled says the attachment isn't sentimental. It's structural. She can describe every character's background because she has to. If she doesn't, the character is just a voice in some other author's room.



Herman

And that's the operational definition I'd hand him. The relationship, if we're calling it that, isn't about the character asking anything back. It's that she has to be able to answer questions about a person who has never actually been anywhere.



Corn

Forty names on a page. One of them ends up becoming the most important character in the book he wasn't supposed to be in.



Herman

And the whole thing written in a notebook bought for no particular reason.



Corn

...I still want to know who the third person is.



Hilbert

The trick is the exit. You can get into a room, but you cannot get out of it clean, and nobody works that out until they're in the middle of the second book. I knew a man who had the whole thing set up in two cabinets...



Hilbert

Mid-list novelist. Three pen names. He'd bought two vertical file cabinets and lined them up behind his chair, and the rule was that whichever cabinet was open, that was the pen name that answered the phone. He had separate letterheads, separate phone lines, and the books had to be registered different ways at the post office depending on what came back. He would not answer to his own name on a Tuesday if Tuesday was a different cabinet. This is in the early two-thousands, when that was all paper, no state of it was on a screen anywhere.



Corn

Two cabinets behind the chair. Somebody actually sat in a chair and turned around to decide which man they were.



Hilbert

The rule that went with it. The pen names were never allowed to meet. No cross-references. No shared minor character. No street that appears in two of them. He said if the worlds touched, they'd contaminate, and the reader would smell the author behind the curtain. Cost him a character called Mrs. Fenwick. He had a doctor's receptionist who worked in two of the series, and it gutted him to cut her, and he cut her anyway, because the two towns were forty miles apart in his head and he couldn't make them closer.



Herman

Two years' worth of a character, gone on geography.



Hilbert

Three weeks he couldn't write. He'd written a chapter in the wrong voice.



Corn

The wrong voice.



Hilbert

He knew before he read the page. He'd written the opening line and knew the cadence belonged to the other man, and he couldn't unhear it. He said it was like putting a hat on and finding the wrong head inside it. He sat with that for three weeks, started in on the letters instead. Answered fan mail that wasn't addressed to him, in the third name, because at least the third name's mail was easy.



Herman

There was a man named something in all of this.



Hilbert

Arthur Pinch. Arthur did the filing. Never read a word of the books. Read every single one of the letters, twice, and kept a tally in the margin. Six hundred and forty-one from Cork.



Corn

Six hundred and forty-one letters from Cork, and he counted them.



Hilbert

He counted them twice. He did not like the third pen name and it showed in the margins.



Corn

The cabinets were the whole method.



Hilbert

The cabinets were it. Nothing was in a computer until well after; he did all of that by hand, and the day the estate brought the paper in, there was a set of inked page proofs in each cabinet with corrections in three different hands, and I've never decided whether it was one man copying three hands or a man with three actual ways of writing. I said I'd never decide it and I've kept to that.



Corn

Three weeks. For a chapter.



Hilbert

Three weeks, and he finished it on a Friday. Arthur told me the third cabinet got sold with the desk, and the desk went to a man in Worcester who resells that kind of thing. I never got the number.



Corn

That's the whole thing, isn't it.



Herman

Ties straight back to Daniel. The walls between the worlds aren't effort, and they aren't even preference. They're a rule.



Corn

Three weeks over a wrong cadence, and one receptionist cut for the sake of forty miles of geography. Rowling says the rooms don't bleed. That man wrote the whole thing so they couldn't.



Herman

Notice where the cost actually showed. Not in the plotting. In the paper.



Corn

Every world you invent charges rent in the real one. The rent for Rowling is a laptop and a set of master files. The rent for Arthur Pinch was two file cabinets and a resold desk.



Corn

The room where the characters live has to move with her.



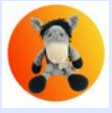
Herman

Which raises the question I don't think the record answers. What happens to the rooms when the writer no longer has to hold the walls up herself?



Corn

If the boundary is a rule rather than a wall, then the machinery doing the sorting has always been the writer. The notebooks were the first version of the writer, and the spreadsheets were the second, and the cabinets were the third. Take the writer out of the middle and you're back to the question of who keeps the rooms apart.



Herman

The question for Daniel, and I think it's the right one to leave on, is whether the thing she's calling a room is really a place, or whether it's the thing that stops her from walking through the wrong door.



Corn

That's a cliffhanger and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. Before we go, one word about the show's producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who keeps the actual rooms from spilling into each other here.



Herman

He does.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you found the episode useful, leave us a review somewhere it helps, or find us on the website at my weird prompts dot com, or email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.