**Dina Nayeri Interview Transcription**

**Music**

**Hannah:** Hello! This is Hannah and Daphne from Glasgow Women’s Library. Today we’re bringing you a short interview with author of The Ungrateful Refugee, Dina Nayeri. We spoke to Dina after her event with Nick Thorpe at Edinburgh International Book Festival. The Ungrateful Refugee was the July August Digital Reads book – our online digital book group.

**Daphne:** Aged eight, Dina Nayeri fled Iran along with her mother and brother, and lived in the crumbling shell of an Italian hotel-turned-refugee camp. Eventually she was granted asylum in America. In 2017 her Guardian long reads article with the same title was widely shared and talked about. This year Canongate published her book which weaves together her own vivid story with those of other asylum seekers in recent years, bringing us inside their daily lives and taking us through the stages of their journeys, from escape to asylum to resettlement.

**Hannah:** We asked Dina about the process of publishing her first piece of non-fiction and the importance of sharing very personal stories even though it can be difficult.

**Dina:** The book publication process in general is such a, you know, so unnerving. It’s like being skinned, you know, you feel very raw and vulnerable and the whole world is watching. But one thing that's really very different about fiction is that you have this veil of like having created this, you know, this isn't your life, this is something you made and even though I actually use so much of my own life for my fiction I still felt really comfortable using that veil to control I guess how much of me I show. With this, I think the biggest shock for me was that, okay, I've now written about my life, I've written a lot of kind of embarrassing things that felt really okay to say in the privacy of my writing room. But maybe like, and it's good as a writer to not be thinking about the audience, when you write that's how you write good things. But then later, when it comes out, you're suddenly confronted with those things. You know, when people ask questions, who've read the book, and then you think ‘Oh, my God, why did I tell that story?’ But I think in general, it's been really positive because I did want to share these things. These stories are really very important to what I'm trying to say. I mean, I want the world to understand that there's a lot of private things that, you know, migrants don't share. And, you know, immigrants have all kinds, they don't share, because there's so much shame from trauma, there's so much of the putting away of the old life in order to embrace the new. And so we do have secrets, you know, and a lot of them will be embarrassing forever, you know, because that's what we've been trained to feel about them.

**Hannah:** What I really loved about the book was Dina’s own reflections on storytelling and the mechanics of telling a good story, and how refugees are constantly telling their own stories, in camps and to one another, to immigration officers, to writers and journalists and so on.

**Dina:** There’s this kind of similarity between fiction and non-fiction, about what makes them good that is a place I'm comfortable in, which is that, you know, as soon as you get the urge to start telling people things it's better to just fall right into a story, you know, and to show them exactly how it works in the most human terms. And in fiction you can *only* do that but in non-fiction there's the space of also, you know, of being essayistic and talking about an issue and a theme, and I do that in the book, but I think I do feel comfortable as a writer falling back into story after story after story. And really it is the way to reach people. You know, that's what people remember. They remember the characters you created not this talking point or that talking point, you know.

**Hannah:** The subjects at the heart of this book mean, at times, it can be quite a necessarily tough read, but it also has real moments of warmth and humour. One of the stories that Dina talked about at the Book Festival event and with us was about three Romanians who got caught up in a love triangle at Hotel Barba, the camp where Dina spent time as a refugee.

**Dina:** I still can't believe it. Like, I don't remember if I said this part in the book but, you know, there was a balcony that the Romanian, the lover, you know, he would climb across to get to the wife, and it was across my balcony. Like so he would he would like climb from his those these, there was like these like little rooms, and they had this tiny balcony space and the wife and the husband were on this side of us and the man was on the other side and he literally would climb across from ours to get to her. I mean, I remember I was nine years old; I was for the first time like witnessing scandal.

**Daphne:** Stories like this are a good example of how small scandals are a way for people to come together and find a distraction while life is on pause.

**Dina:** That’s the worst part about waiting, is like, you don't have enough of a footing to be able to live the drama of life, you know, I think and when people start to anyway, that's when things get interesting but that's when they stop waiting and I guess that's a good thing.

When you're writing non-fiction you're trying,you know, first of all, you have to be absolutely truthful but then you also have to bring a story to life. So you have to find the physical details that maybe they're not in the interview, or you have to bring it up in your memory. So you have to go looking for pictures, or you have to go looking for context, in the in the case of other people, you know, and describe things etc. And I think this is where the difference happens. In my own story, I had access to like, all of these memories, and I had access to photo albums and videos and other people's memories, and I could really bring it to life much easier whereas in other people's stories I had to stay faithful to what they told me, what I know from the news, and what I know from the region of the world that they live it. But in many ways that was actually easier to do because, because it was limited, I had to create something living out of that and there was no question about it. And so I set to the work of doing it. Where it's just my own story, I mean, gosh, how many times in my life have I lied to myself with my own memories? Like, did I actually tell the most accurate version of that? In some stories, my mother disagrees. She says, ‘no, you didn't, you completely lied about that thing and that thing and that thing.’ So in that way it was harder because the choices that I was making were affecting the truth I was creating about my life. And of course, it was ultimately my truth and not my mother's or my brother’s. But I think that made it much more complicated.

**Daphne:** In her book, Dina talks about shedding institutions and doctrines that don’t align with her personal feminism. In our chat Dina spoke to us about her own journey towards finding feminism.

**Dina:** I could write an entire book just about feminism.Because the thing is that that like, I feel as though every place that I've lived in and every kind of society that I've lived in, the question of women was just such an urgent one. Because being born in 1979 in Iran there was always the veil, and everybody was talking about the veil and how we have to wear it outside now. And even though I was born right when that happened and I hadn't seen any wrong way, you didn't have to wear the veil. The adults talked about it so much. And there were pictures, there were pictures of my mother in tight jeans in university with her hair blown out, you know, sitting in a lecture with men – unfathomable, after the revolution. And there were pictures of, you know, celebrities and musicians and things; that was a different world. So this question of why are women veiled and suppressed and covered up now was very much alive in me when I was a little kid. And when my mother decided that her answer to all of this, this feeling of like rage and being pent up and being like repressed, was Christianity I thought ‘Okay, well, this is the answer. Here is a religion in which people of the world that practice it seem to be free. And here's a religion in which you know, it says, love your wife versus like what we were reading in the Quran which was a little bit harsher. And so I thought, Okay, this is a perfectly feminist, I didn't use the word feminist with myself, but a perfectly like, equal religion or religion in which women can be the same as men. But then when I went to Oklahoma, and so actually the same sort of dynamic playing out, the women asked to be subservient. The women asked to be meek, to play second fiddle to the men to crush their ambitions for the sake of the men. I thought, ‘Wait a minute, this is not the Christianity that we had.’ And I realized, okay, it wasn't the Christianity itself that was the kind of female advocacy thing that was happening, it was the rebel communities. In a Muslim, you know, community, a group of, you know, religious rebels would be much more quote unquote feminist, then say, in a Christian community the same religion would. Does that does that make sense? Like there too the feminists were the rebels, you know, there too it was the people who were like, ‘No, I'm going to be an atheist or whatever.’ So I thought, I think feminism kind of goes hand in hand with rebellion. And it doesn't really matter what your religion is. If the country is all that religion, the men will take it over and then the women have to join some fringe group. And that's why the Christians were talking the language of feminism in Iran. And they weren't in Oklahoma because they were the outsiders in Iran and they weren't in Oklahoma. And that's, that's the thing that I've learned. So then later, as I after I could articulate where I stand on all this, I thought ‘Okay, well, I'm just going to go straight to the feminism. That's my religion, I'm not going to try to find some other ideology that embraces it.’

**Hannah:** At GWL we are always interested in hearing and celebrating the women who came before, the women who inspire us and who paved the way. So we had to ask Dina who these women were for her and her answer captured so many different women from different areas of life, from family to friends, fellow writers and the endlessly inspiring Michelle Obama.

**Dina:** I think if you collected the women who I feel like, made me *me* into a room I would burst into a flood of tears because they are so different. And the thing that they have in common is that they have this inner power, you know, an inner strength. And I think I have to start with my mom, because my mom rebelled, you know, like she, it's funny now, she seemed to me, so conventional, like, Oh, so Christian, and so very careful not to like, you know, piss anyone off, whereas I loved to piss people off. But actually, as I get older, I see myself becoming a little bit more careful around others too. But when she was my age, she was so much more rebellious, and so much more powerful spirit than I ever have been. And so she has to be the number one. Then when I when I went into you know, there were just kind of the years of going down the wrong path where I was doing the business world stuff. But later when I became a writer, I studied under Marilynne Robinson. And Marilynne was, I think the thing that she exuded that really impressed me was this quiet gravitas. And in when I had come from this culture where it was necessary to be loud, and the women were loud. And my mother was loud. And I was loud. Here was someone who had spent her life just becoming just absolutely smart on something and having the kind of thoughts that were next level to what everybody else was thinking. And she had a deep, you know, reading and writing practice that was just about herself. And she had a relationship with her brain. It was, that's what it was, like, if she didn't take the fact that she was her brain for granted. Like she had a relationship with it, she's like, this is what's going on in my subconscious mind when I sleep, this is the problem that is being solved. And this is the problem I'm working on more consciously, like, it was fascinating to me, and she would sit there, just this human woman, you know, and, and, like, at times quietly for hours at the time as the rest of us talked, and I thought I learned a lot about I guess from her about went to speak, and went to just learn and listen and observe. And also I learned a lot from her about how to do the years, you know what I mean? Like, like, so for her it's been decades of becoming, you know, decades of becoming Marilynne Robinson, you know, and she can only be that formidable woman late at life, because that's how long it takes, you know, and you can't fake it before that. And this is very, very freeing the way that she lives. So there's, there's that, did you say we could include people we haven't met?

**Hannah and Daphne:** Yes!

**Dina:** Okay, because there's of course Michelle Obama. I think for me there’s something… she and I went the same university so I knew about her well before she was a First Lady. And I think the thing about her that was impressive was that she was an icon among outsiders. So when I was at Princeton, she had already graduated. But if you talked to people in the black community at Princeton, they already knew about her and she was already actually trying to change things for them. And she had a voice and, and I think, to be looked up to by people who are on the margins, you know, as someone who's helping is so much more important from the identity she later had, which is this global icon, you know, so that's the part of her that I admire, you know, someone who, again, you know, had longevity and purpose and just long term goals. And let's see who else… You know, all of the writers that are admire our older women – Lydia Davis, Alice Munro, Tessa Hadley, like, these are just women who have spent a lifetime devoted to a craft, like, that's what I want to do. I think as much as I love, you know, going out and promoting books, promoting ideas and doing activism. If I had to choose just one aspect of the writing life, it would be to sit in a room and tinker and tinker and tinker until I crack the code of like language, until every single word in a book that I write is absolutely perfect the way it is, in say Alice Munro’s stories, you know. I like the idea of being devoted to something forever, for a lifetime.

**Hannah:** Thank you to Dina Nayeri for taking the time to speak with us about The Ungrateful Refugee. It’s available to borrow from Glasgow Women’s Library and to buy from all good independent bookshops. Thanks also to Edinburgh International Book Festival for making this interview possible. Our current GWL Digital Reads is Celestial Bodies by Jokha Alharthi. To find out more, head over to womenslibrary.org.uk.

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