Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: Denise Mina's Ernest Hemingway's Third Wife.

Artwork by: Illustrated by Kelly Shek, Eve Eisler, Ekaterina Tommie, Lily Shallcross

**Laura Dolan:**

You're listening to a Glasgow Women's Library podcast this is part of our 21 Revolutions programme celebrating two decades of changing minds at Glasgow Women's Library for more information on the Library our 21 Revolutions programme or any of our other work visit our website at women's library dot org dot uk

**Denise Mina**

I'm Denise Mina and I'm a writer. um well I wrote this piece uh I was at a book fair in um Switzerland and I was sitting next to a very beautiful American writer and it's basically just a conversation we had but I was thinking about the Women's Library and I was thinking about how do you retain your integrity in the face of a very um I don't know how to describe it just being in a business that you're not really temperamentally suited to and it's very gendered and you know it's very much about being able to sell yourself and so I was having this conversation with this writer sitting next to me uh and she was talking about Martha Gellhorn and we both were very uncomfortable but just talking about Martha Gellhorn made us both feel that it was all right to be uncomfortable and just to be ourselves and I found that really inspirational and it's one of the things about the Women's Library I go there sometimes and um look at things and I think I'm going to write about that because it's the obvious point but actually what you end up writing about is always something else.

Ernest Hemingway's Third Wife

This is a beauty contest and we're losing initially we laugh how uncomfortable we say but we don't really mind because we're not that interested in tricking people who might not get them into buying our books slowly though as the day goes on as a drip drip drip wears curves into stone we lose sight of ourselves we start to sag, we feel wrong. We're sitting at a table 50 ft long in the tent with the sides pulled back so that we can see the sun sparkling on Lake Geneva and the snowcapped French Alps Beyond.

French book fairs are different than British ones there's no hiding in the hospitality area until we materialise at the side of a stage, there's no room for shyness or ambivalence or reticence. Here we sit for 2 hours at a time behind displays of our books while readers walk slowly by glancing reading the backs and the accolades fingering our creations before smiling small apologies and moving on. Once in a while a faux steamboat full of tourists passes by outside pumping black clouds of exhaust fumes that cling to the clean lake water the decks are crammed like Nigerian commuter ferries the boat gives a hoot and we laugh but we don't mention farting or anything like that the boat's a reminder that beyond this tent full of literature there is farting and exhaust fumes and shitting, cysts and haemorrhages happen beyond the blinding white tent full of books and writers. The writer next to me is young and shy she's worried about looking younger than she is she thinks it means she's taken less seriously what she doesn't know and I can't tell her because it would be creepy is that if she isn't taken seriously it's because she's too beautiful she can't help it time will help but apart from facial tattoos there's not much she can do about it she tells me she's American but she lives between London and Paris because she's Visa juggling she comes she tells me from a literary family a clever family in New York but not a connected family. I nod but I don't really know what a "connected family" is my family are from Rutherglen we watch yet more people put our books down and move on we lie to each other "Isn't it nice here?" "isn't it nice to have this view?" "my hotel is nice" "the food is nice", "I'm nice", "you're nice" we don't how to segue way into who we really are because we're sitting in public selling ourselves and doing it badly and neither of us are confident.

The man on the other side of me is very confident he is a philosopher has written 10 novels. Ten! He gently slaps my arm with the back of his hand. 10! how many have I written? I try to change the subject but he persists how many? I tell him 13. He pauses for a moment before turning back to his next customer he tells them that his new book is great, very funny, insightful. This man is bombast personified I don't think he has written 10 books it seems to me slightly too round a number to be true 10 sounds like an approximation up from eight or maybe even seven maybe even six. His customer leaves with his books and a flyer for his painting exhibition he's a brilliant painter too he tells me oh he has another customer. While selling more books he tells me that he's a local he's lived here for 30 years everyone loves him he's selling books hand over fist marking them down on a sheet of paper in bushels of five neither myself nor the American have sold any he has sold a lot he needs to he tells me because no publisher will touch him he pays to have them published and sells them himself they're brilliant.

The American beauty and I sip water play with our pens, chat we're not bombastic we can't bring ourselves to tell customers that we're brilliant or funny or unique we don't know what the Army are really up to in Iraq and we don't know what the future will be like. We get down to talking about what writers really care about. She has with her a moleskin ever note squared notebook the 5 times 8.25 with a pocket an elastic band to hold the pages and notes in and when she opens it I see checked pages covered in tiny writing. Every so often she makes notes in it with her pen of choice a roller ball 0.2 black of course. Mine is a black Pilot calligraphic tipped 2.0 although at home I prefer a 2B pencil for the scratchy scratchy noise and the smeary free definition. I don't have a notebook but I'm writing small notes on bits of paper and the inside cover of the book I'm secretly reading under the table. I like chaotic notes on receipts and books tucked into my passport. This method allows small sometimes banal observations to seem arrestingly urgent like a secret passed through bars. She makes a note about a woman's hand gesture and I ask if it's for her next book, "yeah" she smiles looking genuinely happy for the first time since we got here, "it's about women walking in the city the first chapter is about Martha Gellhorn, she was Ernest Hemingway's third wife." as she says this she gives a quick sidelong glance a mini cringe with her shoulder it's as if the ghost of Martha Gellhorn has stabbed her in the temple with a hat pin. "Gellhorn was not Hemingway's third wife" I say it's the first honest thing I've said. "No I know, but most people don't." She looks at me for a minute and a series of thoughts flit across her face. Statistically Gellhorn was the third woman who married Hemingway so she's right and I've corrected her which quite rudely and fervently and that was wrong in this context where fiction is the only thing holding the whole event together. But we meet each other's eye and we both know that Martha Gellhorn was on the beaches at D-Day, first into Dachau, that she covered wars when being a woman meant she couldn't even get accreditation. We know she was at the fall of Saigon with the Republicans in Spain she was in Panama and we know that she married Hemingway and he forbade her to work so she left him and we know that she never cheapened herself by making grandiose claims or pointing out that he followed her to Civil War Spain Gellhorn just did her thing and made mistakes and failed to sell and wasn't sorry. The drip drip drip wore nothing from her the beautiful American squints at the blinding sun on the water. Smiles looking like the old woman she will one day be and mutters "I'll never call her that again" Customers bypassed the table carrying miniature dogs and bags eating ice cream, drinking take-out coffee.

We sit at our table failing to sell ourselves to anyone just being and doing or thing like Gellhorn. I feel a gentle slap on my arm and the man next to me says "sold another one!"

**Laura Dolan**

Thank you for downloading this free 21 revolutions Glasgow Women's Library podcast to find out more about 21 Revolutions visit our website at women's library dot org dot uk there you can find out about the 21 women writers and the 21 women artists who have produced limited edition artworks available to buy from the library while stocks last you can also find out more about what we do why we are special and how you can support us it's all online at women's library dot org dot ukt uk