Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: Undercoat, Model House and Ingrid McClements Papers

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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

**Jackie Kay**

I've always had a wonderful time at Glasgow Women's Library and really enjoyed this space it feels a caring warm welcoming and fantastic place to do a reading in. Actually I remember my very first reading at the library it was all candle lit and warm and uh I was doing a reading and my my phone was in the in my bag which was in the audience and it went off and I knew it was mine but I felt too embarrassed to to see and so I thought I just ignore it and people were turning around and staring at this bag not knowing it was mine giving it um dirty looks and but then it was in those days when the phone kept ringing you back if you didn't if you didn't answer it so it it went off a few times and eventually I had to admit that it was my phone to gales of laughter that was one of the first times that I did a reading there and I remember before I even got to the Women's Library had been told by my dear friend Julia Darling what a wonderful time she'd had at Glasgow Women's Library and how welcomed she'd felt so it felt like I was going to a space where my friend had already been in and uh that was important and feels even more important uh now to me.

I really love the idea of being asked to do this take part in this 21 Revolutions project and not just because of all the other exciting writers that have been picked but because of the brief as it were every every writers has different attitudes towards commissions and sometimes you get commissions that feel like a chore or a duty or difficult to find the spark but a commission that involves using an archive is just about any writer's delight and the difficulty is knowing what to choose so I was really excited to see the Model House made um by women from India and Bangladesh and Pakistan uh to remind them of the houses that they had left and it made me think of V. S. Naipaul's lovely statement that all landscapes exist in the imagination and how when you've left a place your homeland itself becomes kind of imaginary and the building of this Model House made it back into something actually quite concrete something you could see before your very eyes and the photographs are just so moving of the process because the women look happy almost ecstatic and delighted and even the the photographs of the undercoat painted onto the Model House uh were particularly moving so I like the idea of trying to replicate the the process of the house itself by doing an undercoat poem and then the poem itself overlaid.

So this is "Undercoat Model House, Glasgow"

You carry your home with you always where your heart beats and never a day passes without you turning that familiar key and one day the old place moves so it now seems imaginary until you build it again in your mind the rugs the pots made of clay far far away now the high rise flats questions, endless forms, vouchers, dead ends, city streets, double decker, the smile on your face is back as you tenderly paint the wall. Lay the small covers on tiny beds if you were a doll you would gladly rest a wee while lift your raffia legs, smell the curry from the tiny bowl, taste the gingery taste of memory. No place you would rather go now than the place here in your head. No bed you would rather lie on than in your imagination. You see yourself grow small again drinking at the well then watch yourself grow tall again remembering it all.

And this is a poem that goes on top of that poem uh this is "Model House, Glasgow" and in this poem I tried to use words uh that would remind people of their place back home so I I try to use words that were unfamiliar to me but that would be familiar to the women who made the house and uh I like the idea of of trying to do that trying to pull it off.

Carry your home in your head your heart and make it again with your mind's eye lay out the panday hang up the parda look at your smiling face in the shishah. The patang, the balti, the bariyah. Covers on the manji, brightly there. Home is what the heart remembers. Here you are back safe, September. And The booway, koowah, karay, everything is as it should be you see the goat in the mal kamra, and now you don't forget to remember. You build a peeng; you climb the poree, you drill the window you paint the walls, you hang your washing on the rasi. Nothing's been forgotten at all.

I think writing is all about how we deal with time and how we deal with memory and also how we deal with loss and grief in a sense every writers has at their heart um a process of of dealing with the inevitability of your own death your own mortality and also the the experience that you've had uh of grief I was really uh moved to come across Ingrid McClement's papers in the library Ingrid was a friend of mine and I hadn't realised that her papers were kept in the library so I had this sense of wonder when I came across the papers it was almost like the conversation between myself and Ingrid could continue through these papers and it made me think that the dead are still living as long as the living remember them, and it made me think of Ingrid herself uh continuing in a way through this poem I was particularly happy to be able to send it to her daughter and her son and her sisters and for them to to feel part of the poem in a way I think of poems sometimes as being public as well as private and of their potential really to reach out hopefully beyond your own experience and into the experience of of other people's beyond your own direct experience now I was struck in Ingrid's papers of how many of the things that were important to her that she collected her all her papers anti-racism were close to my own heart and it took me back to the days when I read Conditions: Five for instance so it was a particularly wonderful experience that tinged with a a terrible sadness of course because of Ingrid not being with us but I guess my poem's task was to make her with us again.

 "Ingrid McClements' Papers"

How strange to come across you old friend amongst your papers and newsletters Red Rag and Links, Tell a Woman journals. You reappear, framed, folded, faded, open. Years back, sun out, sons playing in your garden, London. We didn't think we were pioneers: mums, lesbians. Years later, we bump into each other, Glasgow. Outside Oran Mor - me with my mum. she loved your hair. You laughed, gamely. 'it's a wig, you know.' We caught up in our sons, your daughter and here you are, once more - kind Highland face, looming through the gone years, that tilt of enquiry - in this archive you left behind. You might conjure me now, or some other woman in Glasgow Women's Library going through your papers on Racial Equality in her lunch hour as you devoured Off Our Backs in yours. How you would have appreciated the oddity of my mum walking through the door of Oran Mor.

On your funeral day and finding your sister there; as if some of the networked meetings of the living connect to the dead in the endless future; as if, old socialist, you're blessed with powers. How often would we like to bring the dead back? Tell them something they missed, make them laugh? You are smiling, surely and the sun is out today. So present are you here, old friend, my steps have followed yours into this sanctuary, this sacred place. Up the stone stairs and through the open door, to see you, colourful, old-style feminist, just there, passing it down: the grandchildren will meet you here.

And in that poem I refer to Glasgow Women's Library as a sanctuary and a sacred space and that is to me very much what it feels like a place where people can come in whatever states of mind they're in and get some kind of comfort from the huge endeavour that's gone into the place the huge love that every librarian and archivist puts into the keeping of women's lives and records I think Ingrid would um just be very happy to know that she's her records had been gone through and she probably would be happy to have her poem I hope so anyway I like to think of of that. I think I could have chosen any number of uh things to write about in the Glasgow Women's Library archive uh for a while I tried old knitting patterns and I couldn't find the voice uh to try and recreate those characters initially I was going to write a story I had too much information almost about knitting and patterns and uh and I'd already written about about knitting uh in Shetland so I couldn't get that going and there was a few other ideas that I had of things that I might find interesting and follow but I couldn't get the spark and sometimes that's an interesting process with with writing sometimes you can have too much information to let the poem through and sometimes it's a question of just finding that moment of ignition that's that little spark or finding the tiny key in a sense so when I saw the Model House I almost knew right away that I would find a tiny key that would allow me to go back to that little house and and open it up and walk through that's a process that I think is fascinating to the writer something that you can't properly teach how to find the tiny keys that open up the the imagination and how to try and find a way to to link uh research or archive or experience with that much more mysterious thing of the imagination um I found that I kept losing the files that I got sent cuz I'm not particularly brilliant with a computer so Glasgow Women's Library um Adele or Laura whoever would send me these files on Dropbox and then I find that I could i' lost them or I couldn't access them so I think I was probably the most uh stupid of the of the writers in terms of losing the Dropbox I'm now actually I must say in my own defence perfectly uh efficient and proficient with the Dropbox and uh and quite enjoy going on and finding files there um so that was that was quite an experience that was probably my first introduction to to the Dropbox um but I found that the librarians all of you um at Glasgow Women's Library to be really really helpful and patient and not to seem to get irritated with me asking for things to be resent again and again so my general experience of the librarians there is that they care a lot and they take their time and they'll give you everything that you possibly could ask for as a writer to help you in that mysterious process of writing so thank you Glasgow Women's Library for providing us all with such a absolutely fantastic sanctuary place to go

**Laura Dolan**

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