

Futures, Connections and Faith

- Jill Stevens, Interfaith Scotland (*chair*)
- Leila Aboulela
- Nadine Aisha Jassat

JILL	<p>Welcome to Futures, Connection and Faith with Leila Aboulela and Nadine Aisha Jassat. I'm Jill Stevens from Interfaith Scotland and I will be chairing today's event. This event is part of Book Week Scotland 2020 digital festival in collaboration with Interfaith Scotland.</p> <p>From November 8th to 15th we had Scottish Interfaith Week through which we celebrated the nations religious and cultural diversity with events held by communities across Scotland. The theme of Scottish Interfaith Week was 'connecting' – today we're here as part of Book Week Scotland which is a national celebration of all things reading and writing. This year's theme for Book Week Scotland is 'future'. So today we'll be discussing faith, future and connection. We hope you enjoy this event. First, hi Leila and Nadine– would you both like to introduce yourselves and tell us a bit about how your writing relates to our themes of faith, future and connection?</p> <p>And Leila, would you like to go first?</p>
LEILA	<p>OK – so, my name is Leila Aboulela, I've written five novels and a collection of short stories. All of my novels are very much related to being Muslim and specially to being a Muslim in the west and in Scotland. I've written about that in my first novel 'The Translator' and 'Minaret' and the latest novel 'Bird Summons', so this is really a theme that's quite close to my heart and it figures in a different way throughout my fiction.</p>
JILL	<p>Thank you, Leila...Nadine?</p>
NADINE	<p>Hi, I'm Nadine Aisha Jassat and I'm a poet and a writer and author of 'Let Me Tell You This' which was my first poetry collection and also a contributing author to 'It's Not About the Burqa' which is an essay collection from Muslim women speaking in their own words and on their own terms. I think faith in my writing is something that in my first collection comes through in, like, quite small and lovely ways but in my sort of current, top secret, writing it's actually a theme that's emerging more and more and certainly I was part of that Outriders Africa work with Edinburgh International Book Festival earlier this year and I went back to Zimbabwe where my father's family are from and that was a huge place of faith and connection for me in that experience, so, a lot of my, my writing that I'm doing just now is really about faith and connection coming together. So really lovely to be talking about it today.</p>
JILL	<p>Thank you, Nadine. I was wondering if we could maybe have a little excerpt from both of your writings – if you'd be happy to read out something?</p>

LEILA	<p>OK. I'm, I'm gonna read from my first novel 'The Translator' and it's about this Muslim widow who, who lives in Aberdeen and she starts to fall in love with a Scottish academic. So, this section that I'm reading describes her, a day, a day at work in the university, because she works as a, as a translator.</p> <p>"In the afternoon she went to pray in the small university mosque – a room given over to the Muslim students. It was in another building, older and more beautiful than the modern building where her own department was. She found the room dark and empty. She switched on the lights, took off her shoes and felt eerily alone in the spacious room with its high ceilings. When it was crowded during term time, everyone just prayed on the carpet, but now she took one of the mats that was folded on a shelf and spread it out. It was blue. Plusher than the one she had at home and with a picture of the Kaaba under a navy sky. There was more reward praying in a group than praying alone. When she prayed with others, she found it easier to concentrate, her heart held steady by those who had faith like her. Now she stood alone under the high ceiling of the ancient college, began to say silently 'all praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful' and the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears. Something deeper than happiness. All the splinters inside her coming together. Once she finished praying, she looked at the notices on the notice board, the prayer timetable, the dates of meeting for the interfaith group, a talk on Jerusalem with a speaker coming up from St Andrews. She walked back to her room through the wet gardens of the campus. Being outdoors in the fresh air was a break in the day. It was colder than it had been in the morning. On days when Diane was not in, Sammar prayed in the room, locking the door from inside. She had an old shawl which she kept in the drawer of her desk and used as a prayer mat. It had seemed strange for her when she first came to live in Scotland – all that privacy that surrounded praying. She was used to seeing people praying on pavements and on grass. She was used to praying in the middle of parties in places where others chatted, slept or read. But she was aware now, after having lived in this city for many years, she could understand how surprised people would be were they to turn the corner of a building and find someone with their forehead, nose and palms touching the ground. She wondered how Ray would feel if he ever saw her praying. Would he feel alienated from her? The difference between them accentuated, underlined – or would it seem to him something that was within reach, something that he himself would want to do." Thanks.</p>
JILL	It's beautiful Leila, thank you.
LEILA	You're welcome.
JILL	Nadine, would you like to give a little reading? ... <i>you're still on mute at the moment...</i>

<p>NADINE</p>	<p>...<i>sorry</i>...I was just singing Leila's praises. That was, that was so beautiful, but also just because we're talking about, like, faith and connection as well and, yeah, just sort of hearing you reading and the imagery that you were reading and sort of feeling that, that sense of connection to what you're saying as well was really lovely.</p>
<p>LEILA</p>	<p>Thank you.</p>
<p>NADINE</p>	<p>I shall, I shall read, so, I'm gonna read a short poem and then a really short extract as well. So, this poem 'Auntie' is about my aunt and, yeah, I think for me – and I, I say this sort of in the extract – the relationship between faith and family is really inseparable, I guess, for me in terms of, yeah, yeah, I think it's, it's quite inseparable. It's connected to people and place especially. So, this poem is called 'Auntie', from 'Let Me Tell You This':</p> <p>"Auntie: My aunt's hands are soft and brown, and they smell like cumin and coriander. She is a gardener in the kitchen. Auntie, I remember your skin the way some people remember the bus route. I know I need to trace it to go home. The world of work, of spells and sirens are harsh alarm clocks. I would rather wake gently – in 5am light – to your softly whispered Duas welcoming the morning."</p> <p>So I wrote that poem, I was gonna say in 2018, but I was like 'no, it's much, much before then'. It was more like 2014/2015 when I'd just been visiting family abroad and then I came back to Edinburgh and I was living on Leith Walk and there was all these noises of the sirens and the busyness and, you know, I've been used to waking up at 5am to the sound of, like, my auntie whispering in Arabic. And it was just this, this feeling of peace that I wanted to transport with me, that I wanted to bring in the poem.</p> <p>And then, a short extract – you're getting poetry and prose from me – two for one. I wanted to read a wee bit from my essay, and 'It's Not About the Burqa' which is called, the essay's called 'Daughter of Stories' and it's about how I learnt what it meant to be a Muslim woman based on the stories of the women in my family and, so just before this extract I talk about being at primary school and I describe sort of being in the little checked dress with the daisies and being told by another child – because my mum is Christian, my dad is Muslim – saying "are you Muslim or Christian? You can't be nothing..." and feeling like I, I didn't exist. And so, then reflecting on this as an adult.</p> <p>"I'd been raised to identify as Muslim but as an adult I didn't really practise. I had developed, like many people both outside and inside Islam, my own sense of spirituality which felt unique and personal. However, I still knew that Islam was a thread running through my identity. Woven within, like the many lessons and experiences that had shaped me and my life. It was present in family, in familiar and shared practises. It was at the heart of many of my key values and frames of reference. Islam is a part of who I am, a part of my story. Consequently, to be told by others that I was 'not Muslim enough' or that my existence lingered</p>

	<p>dangerously over nothing I couldn't be, felt as if I was being pushed directly into that nothing, denying not only my existence but also my connection to my family, my heritage and my story. Family storytelling was an antidote to this dismissal. A way of preserving my heritage in a world where that connection was constantly challenged. For it seems clear to me that many of the connections to Islam which I hold dear today are the ones I gained from family. An inheritance of whispered words held like muscle memory. The fact that 'I love you' is only the first half of the sentence always completed with the words 'may Allah bless and keep you' and the remembrance of Mar, my grandmother who gave and helped those in need. Always. Simply put, stories of Mar helped me to understand Islam, and Islam helped me to understand her, her values, her life, what she lived by. I cannot unpick my sense of who I am in relation to Islam from the thread of being a part of Mar, of aunt, her sister and my wider family. Even my name, the Aisha which sits proudly in the middle, proclaims not only my connection to the faith so close to my heart, but also to Aunt, the Aisha who came before me and who I am named after – the heroine of so many of my favourite family tales. Even in my name there is a story."</p>
JILL	<p>Thank you, Nadine, that was lovely. So much about connection as well in that.</p>
NADINE	<p>Yeah. No, definitely.</p>
JILL	<p>I think it's really interesting, the developing an outside and inside Islam and that connection being challenged. I was wondering if you want to talk about that a little bit more?</p>
NADINE	<p>So, just in the context of, like I said in the essay that, that playground sort of rule that I was given by that girl. And when you are a child, right, you, you're so often thinking in, in set ways I guess and, yeah, she said "you, you can't be Muslim and Christian – you can't be both – you can't be nothing" and I think it really set off this idea of, that I couldn't choose all the different parts of my identity and upbringing and, and faith and self and, and make it, make it unique to me. When in fact I think in practice – and this is something that I've learned directly from the Muslim women in my life – you can make faith exactly, exactly yours.</p>
JILL	<p>Leila, does that resonate with you as well, with your writing?</p>
LEILA	<p>Well ,I think with, with my writing it's about connecting as a Muslim with the non-Muslim that make up the most of the population of Scotland and all, you know, Britain and of the western world. So, it's these characters that I write about, they're, they exist at this time of, you know, the war on terror, the rise of Islamophobia and, so they're, they're living in this really kind of fraught situation where there is this tension. And whether the tension is personal between, you know, them and another character or</p>

	<p>whether it's a kind of a community tension, it's there very much in the fiction. And it kind of like drives the fiction so that even if you're writing, if I'm writing something very ordinary, because of the, of the backdrop it just seems to be somehow charged and people then feel that it is, it's political, it sounds political but that is because it, in itself it isn't but it's because of the backdrop that, that makes it somehow become like that.</p>
JILL	<p>Do you feel that the topic of interfaith or the relationship between different beliefs and cultures influences your writing in that way you were talking about? Some sort of charged background? So how does interfaith relate to your writing?</p>
LEILA	<p>Well, I think it, it does, of course, I mean I grew up in Sudan, I went actually to a Catholic school which, in which most of the girls were Muslim. So, I came into contact with Christians at a very young age and I had, I had Christian friends and there was a lot, there was, you know there's.. Sudan had a, a Christian kingdom in Nubia before Christianity reached Europe. So, there's an indigenous, you know, Christians in, in Sudan and Ethiopia and, that who feel that they are both Christian and African and some of them are Arab. So, I grew up with these people around me, but, so when I came to Britain I thought that the Christians I meet in Britain would be the same but they're very, very different. There's a huge difference between Christians in the west and Christians in Africa and the rest of the world. And, and somehow Christianity in the west is kind of like shrinking. It's fading and, and the, the vigor and the energy is coming from Christians whether they're coming from Poland, or whether they're coming from Africa and, and this is something that has brought, you know, that had come with immigration with the waves of immigration. So, somehow I feel, you know, that I have more, I have a lot in common with, you know, as a Muslim, I have a lot in common with the Christian immigrants who are coming into, into Britain as well. And all of us seem to be coming to pray and to worship in a place where people don't seem to be doing that so much, you know. People have become so secular, and so shy of speaking about their faith and do you know it's, it's not how it was, you know, a long time ago.</p>
JILL	<p>What would your hopes be for, for faith in the future?</p>
LEILA	<p>Well, I hope that there would be more spaces for people to talk about faith and to exchange ideas and to exchange experiences. I think that the, the secular atmosphere is very strong and it kind of suppresses any, any talk of faith. So it's, it's kind of.. I was actually told that it's easier to speak about faith if you're a Muslim than you, than you are as a Christian. That people are actually, in certain circles, people will actually allow you to speak more than a Christian would speak. So, you do feel that way and sometimes I get, I do get comments from Christian readers. In the case of my novel, for example, 'The Translator', it's about this love story between this Muslim woman and a, and a not, non-practicing Christian and he</p>

	<p>converts in the end to marry her and, and some Christians say to me, 'well, we wouldn't get away with writing this kind of novel but you got away with it because you are a Muslim'. So, it's to do with the dominance of the secular, you know, atheist, climate.</p>
JILL	<p>Thank you, Leila. And Nadine, so regarding interfaith relations would you describe your family as an interfaith family and what has your experience of interfaith influenced your writing?</p>
NADINE	<p>Yeah, I think, I think I always would've said we were like multi-faith but I think that's just like a, a difference of language rather than meaning. Yeah, so I, and again I talk about this in the, 'It's Not About the Burqa' essay, of you know being lucky that I got Christmas and Eid, you know, together as a kid so it was like "yes, double the presents" you know. Obviously, this year, you know, it's double the being alone during key celebrations as well. Yeah, so I think that, that was definitely, yeah, I think the multi-faith presence was a part of me growing up, but also, I think in terms of where I grew up was a very multi-faith place, you know. And, you know, we, we would make, it was important to sort of acknowledge and celebrate with all of the folks in our community for a variety for different faith celebrations. Like Diwali for example, so it was really present, I guess, in growing up and when I was at college or sixth form when I did A-levels, I did, like, philosophy, religion and ethics it was called, but sort of, religious studies and theology I guess, just 'cos I loved it. Just as a geek, I loved it. And I found it so interesting, what different people believe and connect to around the world, you know. So, I think it, for me I'm so interested in people's feelings and people's hearts I guess but also the, the power of faith and belief and how personal that is, so I, I've just found it really interesting as a person as well.</p>
JILL	<p>Do you view writing as a kind of spiritual or cathartic process? And, if so, how do you feel that process impacts your writing? Leila, would you like to...?</p>
LEILA	<p>Not really, I wouldn't say that. I'm very, I'm very conventional, I mean for me the spirituality is religious practise, there's, you know, is very, you know the conventional way of praying, the conventional way of, of fasting, reading a Koran and the writing is, is kind of, is worldly. To me the writing is, is about human beings, it's about human feelings and that's very much a worldly thing it's, it's, yes, of course I, I try and write, I do write about spirituality but it's still, it's still human somehow. And, and so it's, it's kind of got, it's, it's not angelic. It's, it's human, it's got human flaws and human, you know, human failings in it, so that's how I, how I see it, yeah.</p>
JILL	<p>Nadine, how would you find, do you find it a cathartic process, writing?</p>
NADINE	<p>I was actually just thinking about, I loved that, I love that description that Leila just said about it's angelic, not angelic. That's human failings. I like</p>

	<p>that. So, I think for me there's, I feel like it's often an age-old question about writing being cathartic and also for me I think there's also a really big difference between what is written and what is published, you know. Because obviously that, that for me, those are at least two different things, you know. What I, the things that I might write in those cathartic moments might be quite different – or might be the same – as what gets published. You know it just, especially with poetry you know, it really, just depends on the wider narrative that you then bring into a collection. But in terms of my inner spiritual, I think for me, you know – as I, as I said in my reading earlier – for me, like, my sense of my own spirituality is so unique to me and personal that I feel like if put it, you know, if I wrote it down on paper and presented it to somebody they might or might not necessarily connect it to Islam or another spiri-, you know, I don't know what, what they would connect it to 'cos it feels like, you know, if we're talking about interfaith and multi-faith it feels like my own spirituality is something that I've, I've drawn from so many different experiences, I guess. And brought into me, including the specific magics that go on in my family as well, you know.</p> <p>So, for me poetry in particular is, it's very spiritual and I often talked about Mary Oliver, the, the nature poet, well, it's much more than, you know, a nature poet but an everything poet really, for me. For me, when I read her work, I find it deeply, deeply spiritual and, and restoring in a really specific way, yeah.</p>
<p>JILL</p>	<p>So, your poetry is very personal. How do you feel when you re-read your own poetry? Do you feel more connected with yourself? Or do you ever find dissonance or disconnection when you read your work?</p>
<p>NADINE</p>	<p>Sometimes I laugh 'cos I'm like 'oh did I write that?' You know, or you know when you like – especially in the, sort of, publishing process where you'll write something, but it won't be published until, like, a time after. And so, you kind of think "well I'm just going to have to trust past Nadine" when she wrote this script. I think it's, I think for me poetry has always been about connecting and I think when I wrote Let Me Tell You This the sort of Angela Davis quote about walls being turned sideways are bridges was really in my mind both in terms of exactly as Leila said earlier about recognising that we're living in a context where racism and Islamophobia are present. And for me I was like, I wanted to write, well I wanted to write poems that related my experience. I'd be like "look, this what I'm living with", you know, and sort of kinda smash that wall like this what I'm living it with, and you should listen, you know, or you're invited to listen. And then, but also in the other way I said I think, just in terms of the power of sharing your experience, especially when it's something that you're often told not to talk about, or especially when part of your experience is being feeling silenced or like your voice hasn't been heard. And for me poetry was a way of sharing that experience and opening these bridges of connection between people, so yeah a bit of both, a bit of the political like</p>

	"we need to talk about this" and a bit of the personal like, "I'm opening my heart to you".
JILL	I like the bridges of connection. I think that's really interesting. And, and Leila, so are there any characters that you've written which you feel a strong connection to? Or have you found yourself connecting with any of your own characters you didn't expect to resonate with?
LEILA	Well, the, my latest novel which is 'Bird Summons', it's about this group of three Muslim women who go and visit the grave, the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbald who, in the highlands. And Lady Evelyn Cobbald was this Scottish aristocrat who shot deer and she, you know, she had this amazing life where she grew up in Cairo and travelled to Kenya and she was the first European woman to, to do the pilgrimage in Mecca and her came back and wrote about it. So, the book is all about how these Muslim women, you know, want to make this connection so they go on this road trip to visit the, the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbald and they kind of see a connection with her. And this connection is about them beginning to feel that Scotland is their home and, you know, having a kind of a, a making roots within Scotland. And so this novel was very much, so for all the time I was writing the novel I was very much aware of, of, and enjoying this process of connecting these, these three Muslim women who had come from different, you know, parts of the world and connecting them to Scotland and kind of the rooting them somehow to a Scottish tradition. So that was a, a good experience for me.
JILL	Did you feel like that it has a lot of your own experiences?
LEILA	Yes, I mean this is certainly a book...
JILL	...are reflected in this story particularly?
LEILA	Yeah... I mean, this is, this a book that I couldn't have written 20 years ago. And it was, it, I could have only written it now, so it was very much as a result of, of all the years that I've lived here. Yeah.
NADINE	I love that idea about "this is a book that I couldn't have written 20 years ago but it's a book that I'm writing now" because, again, with my, my top secret stuff that – now don't tell anyone, but I'm obviously telling you – that there was this sense, 'cos that, that's so much about faith and I think my relationship to faith being such a journey that I think there really is this sense of, that, you know, that personal processing of where you are and then where that comes into your writing. So, yeah, I love that reflection, Leila, about what books you can write in terms of where you're at.
LEILA	Yeah, you're not the same person, I mean, so when I was like, when I was reading this bit from 'The Translator', it was my first book and I was writing it, I wrote it in 98, started in 97/98 and then it got published in 99

	and, and it's just like so long time ago and it's not me and, and but it's,...so it is, it is amazing how these books are, you know, much a part of their time and a part of who you are at that time, you know.
NADINE	Yeah, yeah.
JILL	Is there any kind of writing that you hope your future self will do? Or will, sort of explore?
LEILA	Nadine, do you wanna go first?
NADINE	It's like looking at each other... Sure, my future. I think, yeah, so, I think there's two thoughts in my mind and one of them almost like a question back to Leila about, like, exactly what you were saying. About, you know, we, we write these books as our, like, present selves, but then we become our future selves who are, like, reading our past selves and it's like this whole thing and also like how you, how you balance that within yourself and your own anxieties too, you know. 'Cos there's, there's a, you know, you and you think "oh, there's a typo" but also you're like "gosh, you know, I'm writing differently" or I'm feeling differently or whatever. So, I think it's really, I think it's a really interesting conversation as, like, in general about time and writing and being published. But I think in terms of my future self, I just feel this sense of, like, you know the current work that I'm doing just now feeling so true to my specific experience just now. And then, that I will be different person when, you know, when other people read this work shall we say, like, I will be a different person, and so it's gonna really interesting and I think part of me is just feeling that I've got to actually respect it and see it as that and see it as almost like this writing or this book is a time capsule or this communication of a person captured exactly in that moment of time or place. It's something I think about a lot, you know...Leila?
LEILA	Yeah. I, I'd like to write non-fiction and I actually find it very difficult to do that, to write essays. I'm always writing fiction and I was, I can't get the voice, I, I can't get a non-fiction voice going so maybe in the future I might be able to do that I hope, yeah.
JILL	That sounds good. Is there anything you'd like to tell your past writing self as you're writing your books and poems?
LEILA	Oh, I have so much to say to my past self. The biggest mistake I've made was that I used to send stuff out and then wait for the reaction. And that was such a waste of time. Or, if I get a negative review I'd kind of like, you know, get upset for ages and so I feel I wasted a lot of time whereas I could've written more if I had just, you know, just kept, kept kind of going. So, I guess that's, that's probably the advice I would've given myself.

<p>NADINE</p>	<p>Yeah, I think similarly there's definitely something about believing, believing in myself, I guess. In the past there's definitely that one typo in 'Let me Tell You This', the one typo. To my past self, this page. But also I think, you know, there's, there's something nice as well about, like, especially, you know, this year with the context that we've all been in and I think it can, it can knock your resilience in some ways, you know, when we are in, in such isolated circumstances and so there's something about, where I actually feel quite proud of my past self, you know. 'Cos, I feel like to write a poetry collection that was so honest and so political but so personal at the same time was actually quite brave. So, yeah, I think I would actually say "you know what, you're, like, really brave and you don't even realise how brave you are".</p>
<p>JILL</p>	<p>So, another question would be, what was an early experience where you had learned that writing, or your writing specifically, had power? Leila, do you want...</p>
<p>LEILA</p>	<p>I don't know, I don't know. That's a good question. I haven't thought about that. I actually, oh yeah, something that made very happy. There was a conversation on Twitter about a Sudanese cafe in Edinburgh and this person was asking this other person where is this Nile Cafe, I've been there once and then somebody was saying "oh, I don't know" and then the other person said "Leila Aboulela mentioned it in her story" and then they kinda went on and I was like "oh, wow". That felt like it was really cool... That I was just kinda mentioned in passing. And how did I find out about that? Of course, is because I search for myself.</p>
<p>NADINE</p>	<p>We all do it.</p>
<p>LEILA</p>	<p>We all do it, yes. So that was quite, that was a nice surprise that I felt that I had somehow, that I could be mentioned in a conversation just like that, when it wasn't about me it was about something else and, and, I, I liked that, yeah.</p>
<p>JILL</p>	<p>Have you had conversations with people when they've reflected on your stories and your writing and how it's impacted them? Any stories that have really resonated with you?</p>
<p>LEILA</p>	<p>Oh yes, yes, yes – a lot of people do say that, and you know they say that, you know, they relate to it or they.. I do like these stories and I remember once reading a review by someone and he said, "even this hard-hearted atheist was moved by this book" or something, I thought "oh, that's good".</p>
<p>JILL</p>	<p>Put that on the book.</p>
<p>LEILA</p>	<p>Yes.</p>

JILL	Nadine, have you had similar experience with your writing?
NADINE	<p>Yeah. Yeah, no definitely. So I think, I think that, you know, and I think it's how we think about power and, like, in different ways, you know, like I think one in terms of when I first realised that my book was a powerful collection or that I, I had power as a poet, I guess, what was in you know, in that more like structural or career way, was when I got, like, recognition, like when Jackie Kay, you know the Makar sort of praised it when it was short-listed for the Edwin Morgan. So those were like, OK so you've got power in terms of that context, like there's realising that I could actually be a poet, you know, that kind of, like, you can actually be that. But then I think in terms of, you know, there's that personal power as well, of being, like, you know, I've, I've met myself on the page, where I've met some of my, my biggest rules on the page and I think that's a very different kind of power. But again, I think something about where I wrote some of my most honest poetry on the pages coming to that, I think was the moment of great power to me. But if it's a moment that nobody else will ever, ever see, you know, it's a moment that was just with myself and then definitely, in terms of relationships with readers, you know, people who, especially when I first started reading my poetry in public for the first time and people who had come up to me afterwards and be like, "oh my gosh, you know, that resonated much, so much for me", you know and, and that way of connection. 'Cos when I write, I'm writing just for myself, you know, that's how, how my work starts. And so then when people come up and say "oh gosh, that that meant something to me too" you know, at first it's a bit of a world-spinner, ;cos you're like "whoa, OK" you know, like, and then afterwards you suddenly realise how lovely that is, to have that connection with people and to have that connection with readers. And I know I was doing a, a podcast earlier in lockdown and the person said, sort of, afterwards an aside, you know, that something-something-something had happened and then they, they went and watched my film Hopscotch and they were like, and they suddenly remembered I Was Less Alone and it was just like "oh, gosh, yes, this is why we do it. This is why we do what we do and why we take all of our hearts and put them on the page for moments like this", you know.</p>
JILL	<p>Writing's quite an emotional process, so how do you deal with, sort of, the emotional impact of writing about something personal to you and then sharing it with everyone? Nadine?</p>
NADINE	<p>It's a good question. You know I think, how do I deal with the emotional impact of writing things down and then, and then sharing them with someone else? I think on the one hand, I think it's about, it's more about how you feel about yourself as well at any given time, 'cos I think, depending on where you're at, how you feel about that sharing, is gonna feel different. So, like, like I said earlier, you know, like, I look back and I think "gosh, that was really brave that I did that", was at the time I, you</p>

	<p>know, I might have felt differently. So I think it's really about actually, if you're coming from a place that, you know, being at peace with yourself in, in whatever way, then, you know, it's going to affect how you feel about that positively. And I think for me sometimes I'm like "oh my gosh, that is really vulnerable, do you just wanna share it? Or do you not wanna share it?" I think "well, you don't have to". You don't have to share it if you don't want to. You can sit on it. You can put it in a drawer like something's value doesn't lie in only ever being shared. But if you do want to, because it means something to you to share that, because sharing that feels important to you then, then you can as well and just trusting myself in whatever decisions that I make, and trusting that I will, you know, be able to be at peace with that in, in whichever way it goes. If in the future I fell "oof, that is really vulnerable" or in the future I feel "oh gosh, I wish I'd been more open" you know, just trusting the decisions that I made in that moment and that I knew what was right for me.</p>
JILL	<p>Very beautiful. I like that. And Leila, I know you said you have quite a structural approach to you writing – do you ever get quite emotional when you're writing?</p>
LEILA	<p>I do get emotional when I'm writing but there is still a distance. I mean, I don't want to be like looking, I think if I, if I sat looking over my shoulder and starting to think "what will people think of me" and all that, I don't think this, it will make the writing very self-conscious. So, I, I do can of separate that and I do feel that the, what people think about the work is more important than what they think about me. So somehow, I'm not important anymore. It's the work is more important than me and I guess it's easier to, to, to maintain this as you, as you kind of get older and as you kind of, like, you're no longer, you know, really looking for connect, connections that much with, with people. It's more that, that you're, you're wanting the work to be the work as kind of separate from, from, from my, myself. And I've always felt that, I've, I've never felt, because it's so fictional. Because I don't write – I think that's the, that's the thing about not writing the non-fiction. Because with the non-fiction I would then have to be myself and I actually don't know that, I don't know what, how that will be. I think that will be very vulnerable and that would be very, you know, difficult to, to do, I think, yeah.</p>
JILL	<p>Do you think it's still something that you'd be interested in doing? Some non-fiction?</p>
NADINE	<p>I'm gonna hold you to it.</p>
LEILA	<p>I do, I do, I mean, I wrote once a piece for The Guardian and there was this huge backlash and there was all these people writing horrible things and, and, and, and, and you know, and you think "well, do I really want that" and, and somehow when you write fiction that doesn't happen. Either because these people don't read it, and that is an interest-</p>

	<p>interesting itself. Why is it if I, I wrote a piece for The Guardian which, which, was about Islamophobia and about young people being, you know, you know, being targeted and being held under suspicion and, and so on. And, and all these people were, you know saying angry things but then if I write a novel and, in the novel, I'm expressing the same sentiment I don't get this backlash. So, either it's not the same people, or somehow when you present something as fiction it's more gentle, it's less confrontational. People are willing to kind of like listen to a fictional voice rather than if you come across in a non-fictional way. Maybe. I don't know.</p>
JILL	<p>Nadine, do you have anything to say on that as well?</p>
NADINE	<p>I think there's, I think it's, it's nice for me to reflect on that from almost turning it on its head and reflecting on it from the process of writing as someone who writes a lot of non-fictions draws from their life, and sometimes feeling like "gosh, I wish I was more of a fiction writer" so that it, it didn't feel so, you know, exposing or vulnerable art, you know. Like, even though exactly as Leila says, which is exactly right that you could put all of these things into fiction, you know. I think there's something about when I've been writing stuff that feels really personal of almost wishing like "gosh, hey, I wish I had almost, I wish I had fiction around me" – almost like this protective security blanket where if someone did then come and say "oh, so, you know, XYZ has happened to you" I could be like "oh no, no – that's just the, just the story", you know. Whereas there's not much to hide behind, but there's also something that I find in the way that I write non-fiction quite freeing as well on that other side of being able to express the curiosities of how I live my life and, you know, a lot of the work that I've been doing recently has it, it, you know, is non-fiction but has these really strong elements of almost magical realism, because that is how I experience my life. And I find something in that really freeing and really beautiful as well, so...</p>
JILL	<p>I really like that you experience magical realism in your life as well. Really beautiful.</p>
NADINE	<p>I think we all do I our own small ways, you know. I think we all have these little things; you know. Whether it's like a leaf falling to the ground at a particular time or, whatever that, that feel like moments of deep connection and, and that comes out in my writing which I really love.</p>
JILL	<p>I really like that. So, as we're talking a lot about the future, I'm wondering what kind of stories do you think the world needs more of in future? Leila, do you have any ideas of stories or themes that people need to be reading more about?</p>
LEILA	<p>Well I think people need, need to be reading more about, you know, simpler lifestyles. I think that with the pandemic and with the cli-, you know the , climate crisis we're now kind of, we're gonna be kind of moving</p>

	<p>away from this jet setting, you know, high consumption lifestyle and, and maybe we need to, you know, go back to living a more simple lifestyle, closer to the earth, closer to nature and, and, and it's, it's, it surprises me actually that young people don't have basic skills. I mean they, they don't know what to do, they don't know how to sew, they don't know to, you know, cook from scratch, they don't know how to wash in a tub or, you know, all these things I think would be good for us to, to see these skills whether in, whether in fiction or non-fiction or in songs or, you know, just somehow to, to, to be back in touch with, with a kind of survivor instinct which we don't have. We're very mollycoddled in, in, in the modern world.</p>
<p>JILL</p>	<p>Are there any books that you've been reading over the past few months that you've felt have really resonated with you or brought you hope?</p>
<p>LEILA</p>	<p>Oh, I'm very hopeful – a very hopeful person. I'm don't despair or anything, I think I know, I think people are very resilient. I think people are very, human beings are creative. I think, you know, everything is, happens for a reason. Everything has a meaning. Everything has a lesson for us to learn and I think that, you know, we, we will come out of this a lot stronger hopefully, yeah.</p>
<p>JILL</p>	<p>Nadine, is there any kinda stories that you think the world need more of in the future?</p>
<p>NADINE</p>	<p>Yeah. So, I think for me I would be, I would like more stories where its people sort of like, say you, to you. Which isn't quite right, but where it's people, like, really expressing them, themselves or their writing or however they want to relate to their craft in their own unique way 'cos I think for me, you know, I came, I was writing poetry when I was working full time in a different sector, you know. So I, I wasn't coming from, you know, I didn't do a creative writing degree or anything like that and so I'd write poems like, like Hopscotch which is a poem which is like all the words are spread all over the page and I didn't know if you were allowed to write poems like that, you know. All the, all the poetry that I was exposed to at school was very much one way and I didn't know if how I did it in the way that was natural and instinctive to me, if that was allowed. And so I think what I, what I want to see in the future is more, yeah, more people being able to engage with art in a way that feels right and authentic to them without worry about all these permissions, 'cos I think actually it's gonna bring so much more exciting and rich art works, you know. And just really wonderful ways of, of playing with form or narrative or telling your stories in new ways and, yeah, I, so I think that's what I want to see in the future. And so, for example, I mean this isn't necessarily over the past couple of years I've been reading verse novels and just, again it's completely opening things up for me in a, in a new way, you know. That was something that I'd not been exposed to as a reader before. So yeah, that's, that's like one small example.</p>

JILL	I like that. Is there anyone over the last few months that you've been reading that you found really resonated with you?
NADINE	Yeah, so if anybody follows me on Instagram they know that I really read a lot, I like YA, I like children's literature, like a lot, a lot, and especially this year, you know, I think some of the most beautiful ways. Books can give us so much different things, you know – connection, and peace and, and for me but also that I like wonderful escapism when you're like reading a really good book and you're just totally in it and you're totally there. And this year I've really been prioritising that experience so a couple ones that were just like "yes" was - there's one called Legendborn by Tracy Deonn, again like young adult lit, and one called Empire of Sand by Tasha Suri. And both of them, it was just like, you know, it's like 11 o'clock at night and you, you're just like, reading. And yeah, I just, and I love that about books because it takes me back to being a child and, like, you know, going to my local library and just working my way along the shelf, and just loving reading. And I think that's such a beautiful thing.
JILL	That really resonates with me as well. I've been reading a lot of just the fun things that I really, really enjoy and I can just escape into at night and a lot of YA as well, so.
NADINE	It's good stuff, YA.
JILL	So, one of my last questions is you both tend to write from a feminist perspective, so how would like to see the future of women's lives in Scotland and other parts of the world? Leila, would you like to...?
LEILA	I don't know.
NADINE	Big question...
JILL	It is a big question.
LEILA	I'm interested in how the people are saying that the pandemic has, has made women, like, more at home and more, like, looking after the children and, and kind of being like a, a step backwards in women's lives. So, I find that quite an intriguing thing and I'm wondering whether, you know, whether that will hold out 'til the end or whether it's just an anxiety that's just part of the anxiety and things will go back to normal again.
JILL	Nadine?
NADINE	For the future of women, I guess, broadly, I guess the word that's coming to mind is freedoms. Wanting freedoms for women, almost in the same way as I was thinking about, that freedom of expression as a writer. Yeah, I'm thinking some, that there's something about freedoms, 'cos I think actually, especially when we're looking into sexually a different

	<p>experience for different women, and the, sort of hatreds that we've seen, you know. And the, and the violence this year, you know, for example, Breonna Taylor, you know, who was murdered I think, this, that is not, that is not freedom. And so, I think there's, for me, freedom would be an important thing that women are free to live their lives without hatred or persecution or oppression. And especially this year in terms of, like I say Black Lives Matter, hatred towards trans women, all of these things, I think, that isn't freedom and I want women to have freedom, so yeah...it is a really big question.</p>
JILL	<p>Thank you Nadine, it was. Just thought I'd throw that in at the end. I'm curious, is there anything that you'd like to ask each other? Anything you're curious about each other's writing? I know there's a book on your shelf Nadine from Leila...?</p>
NADINE	<p>Right. Can I...I need to get my...here we go...here we go...</p>
LEILA	<p>Yeah, I wanted to ask Nadine how she started to write and if this is something that she's knew, knew from when she was young that she wanted to be a poet...?</p>
NADINE	<p>Yeah. I think, when I was younger, I didn't think I knew you were allowed to be a poet, you know. I think I, it's almost like being a celebrity, right, you just never kind of think it would ever happen to you and it certainly was never presented as, like, a career choice. But I think I always was a poet, like I used to.. Actually, my first published poem - I don't think anybody knows this, so this is like a Book Week Scotland exclusive – my first published poem was when I was, like, ten years old and like an Amnesty International newsletter, you know. Yeah. And so, I think there was, I always knew it within myself, but I think I needed that permission, I guess. And so I, when I became a published poet I was, I was working in a different sector but I think that sector gave me so much experience that I draw on as poet, you know, you, we are more than just one thing, right, what about you Leila?</p>
LEILA	<p>Well I had, I had always loved reading but then I didn't start to write until I came to Scotland, so it was really the move, you know, from Sudan to Aberdeen and finding it so different and, and wanting to express that, you know, difference and the, and my homesickness and, and so I started to write. I started to write rather late, I was about maybe 28 years old when I, when I started to write, so it's a bit, a bit late. But it was also inspired by being, having access to the Aberdeen Central Library and going to the library. It was really exciting to suddenly, you know, have this, you know, burst of words coming out. It was really quite an exciting time, so...</p>
NADINE	<p>I was 24, so I feel like we were, we were both in the same...yeah. Even though, apparently, some people think I'm still, like sort of 24/25 now and I'm like hell yes...time travelling.</p>

JILL	Well, I think that's everything that we have time for today, so thank you Nadine and Leila for joining us. Was there anything last that you would like to say.
LEILA	It's been very nice to have this, this discussion and it's, it's always nice to have the opportunity to, to speak about faith and spirituality, yeah.
NADINE	Yeah, and, and thank you so much so much for having us. And I almost feel like we should end on a question back to you Jill about, you know, what, what your hope is for the future or what kind of one word you would use to bring that together?
JILL	I would say to bring it to the theme of Scottish Interfaith Week which I think is really important is 'connecting' – I think we need to find more ways to connect with each other and find things that we have in common and also things that we have that are different that we can embrace and celebrate together. I think that's really what I would be looking for – is more ways to connect with each other and things that we can connect about.
<i>unattributed</i>	True.
JILL	Thank you, thank you for sharing your views on faith, future and connection. It's been wonderful to hear about your experiences and influences in your writing. So, this Book Week Scotland event had been brought to you by Scottish Book Trust and Interfaith Scotland. Scottish Book Trust wants everyone living in Scotland to have equal access to books because better access to books means better life chances. You can help by gifting a book to a family who's struggling this Christmas. If you've enjoyed this event please consider sharing your love of reading with others by making a donation to Scottish Book Trust Christmas Appeal at scottishbooktrust.com If you'd like to learn more about interfaith dialogue, education and engagements then please visit interfaithscotland.org Thank you for coming.