# Event transcript: Glasgow Women's Library Garnethill Walking Tour with Denise Mina

Welcome to the Women's Library, Denise. I'm Melody, I'm a volunteer here, and today we're going to be talking about one for the tours that we do around Glasgow and is focused in Garnethill. So we actually do tours all over the place, but Garnethill focuses a lot on the history of women writers and also it's a setting of a lot of books that women have written here in Glasgow.

Fantastic. Because there's loads I don't know you know, there's loads of stuff that when you're in Garnethill you're aware that 'I'm sure somebody wrote a book set here...', but anyway you're going to fill me in.

Well Denise here we are in Garnethill and this is where the Women's Library have one of our tours that you can go on. And we like this setting here in Garnethill because it really highlights the work of all of these women who have made Garnethill what it is today and added to the culture and the vibrancy of the city around it.

It's a real hidden history isn't it?

Yes.

The history of women in the culture.

Women are very rarely recognised for the contributions that they do to Garnethill, for example if you look behind us on top of these lamp posts you'll see tiny little statues of birds.

Oh yeah!

Those are called Chookie Burdies and they were design and made by Glasgow born artists.

Chookie -

Chookie, Chookie Burdies.

As in wee chookie.

I won't try and sing the song for you...

Oh right okay. [Laughs]

So who did them?

An artist called Shona Kinloch in 1993 and she is Glasgow born and designed these and they are only seen in Garnethill.

Oh do you know I come up here all the time and I've never noticed them.

Everyone says that! And it's one of my favourite things about the city because it really makes it seem so special and you can see that cheeky little hint -

Attention to detail -

Yeah that isn't in any other part of the city.

Yeah.

And that's the exact thing that we like to highlight with these walks are these women that have really like made this part of the city what it is today, but don't get recognised for that.

Yeah.

And Shona Kinloch is one of them. And that's kind of what you do with your books as well, you highlight these histories of women and these women's lives that people don't generally like to pay attention to.

Well I don't know that it's people don't like to... It's just whatever is happening now appears to be politically neutral.

Yeah.

And if you challenge anything it looks as if you're being very political but actually to say that the whole of history is written by men, to say that every history journal is edited by men, to say that the whole of history is just men attacking men with big swords and guns and tanks is profoundly political. And that's, you know, no one ever gets pulled up for saying that that has any kind of political content. It's only when we come in and challenge it. Or say "Look at those birds" you know? Or look at the overlay history of immigrants, look at the history of immigrants in this city. Because this is a big immigrant area, Garnethill.

Massive immigrant area, yes.

Yeah, so people often come here and it's geographically quite a strange place because it's like a big hill in the middle of the city that is so steep drunks' can't get up it, which is - get down it but they can't get back up it. [Laughs] And it gives it a really kind of special attic-type flavour, you know?

So the next women we are going to be talking about is Catherine Carswell.

Ah yes.

She was a biographer, a journalist, an author, and she was born right here.

Oh she was born here, I didn't know that.

Yeah, 101 Hill Street.

Wow.

And she later moved to Renfrew Street. But she grew up around here. She studied music in Frankfurt, then she studied English Literature at Glasgow University and she also went to the school of Art.

Well for a woman to even go to university at that time was a big thing.

Exactly she was born in 1879 so...

Right, yeah.

Sadly when she was quite young she entered a very abusive relationship with a man called Hubert Jackson, who unfortunately tried to murder her a year into their marriage. But she was very fortunate to have been able to apply for an annulment, and this was in 1908 -

Wow!

- and she was one of the first people to actually be able to get an annulment from her husband on the grounds of his insanity. And I think that was kind of emblematic of her career; she went on to really champion women's rights.

So she was chased out of Glasgow for being a free lover and an outspoken women wasn't she?

Yes she, as her role as an art critic at the Glasgow Herald, she showed her support for the novel The Rainbow by D H Lawrence, which was a very controversial novel at the time as it dealt a lot with sexual desire - oh how dare it! It was actually banned for a number of years here in the UK and thanks to that she was fired from her role and actually received so much hate for that - she was sent a bullet in the mail - and she actually had to leave because it became quite dangerous for her to be around.

Yeah, yeah.

And all of her books were taken out of publishing, they were only published much later on, by Virago.

Yeah Virago picked her up. I remember working at The Chip, reading Catherine Carswell and Bernard McCafferty saying "Who is this you're reading?" and it was Virago just brought the books out. Yeah, and he was laughing because her blurb was from D H Lawrence and he said something like 'She writes to me very often.' and that was her blurb on her book. Because nobody talked about her, she was comletely forgotten and had it not been for Verago we wounldn't be talking about her now. She was so far ahead of her time. If she was born in the 60s she'd have been an iconic figure in Glasgow but she, basically she was too early.

Yeah, exactly.

And she's a beautiful writer. The Camomile is a very beautiful, thoughtful, well-paced piece of writing, it's beautiful.

Because she's such a great writer the Women's Library wanted to honour her as well, and so our annual women's writing festival is actually named after her first book Open the Door, and it is to keep that history of her alive. And like you said a lot of people don't know about her because she was so controversial, and it's thanks to Virago for republishing her books and also places like the Women's Library that make sure that history is spoken about.

Yeah.

Right and here we are coming up to the synagogue and this is where we like to talk about Hannah Frank. She was an artist that lived here in Glasgow from 1908 to 2008 and she is very well known for a lot of her lined pen ink drawings, but she was actually also a sculptor and a poet, and not a lot of people actually know that. She wrote a lot of her poems under the pseudonym Al Aaraaf, which is actually the title of an Edgar Allan Poe poem. But it's also the name of a star that a Danish astronomer discovered when he saw this star that was burning brighter and brighter and brighter for several days, until it eventually just disappeared forever. The funny thing is that would have happened to Hannah's artwork and her poetry if it weren't for her niece, Fiona, who actually found all of this artwork in her house and made sure that it was remembered. So actually I have someone to introduce you to: this is Barbara Spevack.

Hello Barbara.

She is one of Hannah's great nieces and she's actually going to read us one of her poems today.

This is a poem called Faery that was in the Glasgow University magazine in 1927.

[Reading] I stayed me there in tall trees’ shade

In Faery. And wild strange music played,

Piercing the air with sweetest strain,

So that I trembled. Dimly lit, a train

Moved from the forest’s depths.

I saw them by the weird moon’s gleam

On horses pass. As the riders of a dream

They passed – noiseless hoofs and harness swaying.

Fair ladies singing songs, and strange words saying,

As olden stories tell.

In Faery I stood in tall trees’ shade.

Dim were the windings of the glade.

They were gone. I heard music still,

Faintlier, wafted faintlier, till

It died in the forest’s depths.

Oh how lovely.

Beautiful!

She was very inspired by mystical, kind of magical themes.

Yes she has been described as being like a mystic.

Yeah.

I think you can draw a line from Coleridge to Edgar Allan Poe to her work. That kind of other worldly exoticism kind of quite spiritual, that's beautiful .

Yes, and it definitely has that rooting in spirituality because she also took a lot of inspiration from the Bible.

Ah yes, she did lots of drawings of Job, Adam and Eve...

And did she actually attend this synagogue?

Yes I think so.

It's such a beautiful building, and it's so unseen because it's kind of tucked back off the road. And you can see it from the other side as you're coming up the hill from the CCA, you can see the dome.

And that dome is part of the archive, and that's actually where a lot of Hannah Frank artwork actually resides there.

She's so lucky to have family like you though because quite often amazing women artists just get forgotten, don't they?

Exactly.

Their work just disappears and there's no one to celebrate them or insist that they get their place in history.

Well my late mum always collected her work, she bought it from her.

Oh, did she?

So I've had her sculptures lying around bookcases and her pictures on the walls.

We would have lost those beautiful words and the beautiful poems if it weren't for Fiona. And I think that the Women's Library does something very, very similar. The Women's Library has actually from its very origins always championed women artists and women writers. It started as a collective called the Women in Profile project and they started because during the European City of Culture in 1990 Glasgow was focusing almost exclusively on male artists and workers, and so the Women's Profile project wanted to champion women's work.

So before all of this was kind of demolished for this pitch, this lane housed the very first beginnings of the Women's Library, then called Women in Profile. So they had a tiny little shop here that had no windows. It didn't have a bathroom and it was infested with rats. But they held a number of different events and projects and it was actually incredibly successful. And so from that they moved right around here to start the Women's Library.

I mean that's how far diversity has come. Was that in 1990 you could put on a festival celebrating Glasgow and there was no one in it who wasn't a white, cis man. And that was a reflection of the whole city. That's unthinkable now, and that's because of places like the Women's Library.

This was the very first kind of premises of the actual Women's Library.

Wow, I remember this being here actually. I remember a big banner thing saying, did it say 'Women's Library'? And I remember laughing at it and thinking "What is that about?" This is just some dungaree-d up nonsense. And then I joined [laughs] and then I went to a writing course down, when they moved down to Trongate and it was Mary Wings who was a crime writer from San Francisco and an activist, and she taught a crime writing course over a weekend. Because I was halfway though Garnethill and I got really stuck and left it for a year and it was because of that course that I finished the book and got it published.

Oh that's amazing.

Yeah so it was all thanks to the Women's Library you know.

My personal history is almost entirely because of the Women's Library. So for me that was really, really important that there were other people involved in this project of retelling these stories from a feminist point of view. I mean I thought I was writing Garnethill for six other women, who were also members of the Women's Library.

Yeah.

But it turns out a lot of people wanted to read that. A lot of people wanted that story and a lot of people understood, you know, that victims of sexual assault were not only found dead in a ditch, that they were rumbling about running things. They were people. And they were people who had lives afterwards and you know, so that fact that that was set up at all was such a comfort to so many people, and I'm not surprised that it burgeoned into the massive entity that it is now, because there was such a thirst for it.

From here as you say they moved to Trongate.

Yeah.

And they were there for a few years until moving to the Mitchell. And then finally in Bridgeton where they are today.

And they've got a dedicated building, so they've gone from a room with no windows -

No windows, rat infestation -

- to an actual library, free standing, purpose-built -

Listed building -

It's amazing, it's really incredible what they've done.

It is and it's all the work of women. Women made this happen, and it's also highlighted the work of women through it's whole history. From their very, very, very beginnings that was their focus.

Yeah and it gives us a space. Because at that time you really couldn't get published unless you were talking about heavy-smoking men who got in bar fights. That was Glasgow. It was just angry, angry men, there was nothing else you could talk about or represent in Glasgow narratively, you know. Or men who rejected that model. That was really all you saw. And the totally supportive people doing all sorts of different work. And they started the lesbian archive which was really important because really important historical artefacts were just being chucked out because there was nowhere for them to go. So they said "Bring all the stuff and we'll look after it". Actually I remember there was an incident at Trongate where a very, very drunk man had seen lesbian archive sign and he broke into the building. He clearly thought the building was full of lesbian pornography. [Laughing] And then he was so drunk he got trapped on the stairwell and they had to call the cops on him, it was quite funny. But you know they were doing things that no one else had thought about, and all that history would be lost and it's now an international collection, it's really, really important.

Yes and it's won awards. And as you said looking where the Women's Library is today and seeing its very, very humble beginnings here it just shows you, number one, the things that women can achieve when against all odds and against the support of so many different people and institutions around them, but also how important and integral that work is to the cities that they live in. And I think that is the most important thing to take away from any of the walks that we give here.

That's brilliant. That's brilliant, Melody. You're absolutely right.

So we've just come down the hill and we've stopped here because this is a very special spot on our walk, because it's Maureen's flat from Garnethill.

Yeah that's it, Maureen O'Donnell lives in that flat behind the trees there. So all the stuff, you know the police are driving up here and she's watching people out the window, at one point she thinks about killing herself by jumping out the window. At the very start of Garnethill she's looking out over the M8 there, and it's one of those Glasgow days where it could go you know it could be a storm or it could be gorgeous. After the war when they rebuilt the city they put the M8 there to cut the city up because if there's going to be a Bolshevik revolution anywhere in the UK it would be in Glasgow.

Wow.

So they moved all the poor people out, and they built that as a defendable ring to put tanks on, so that they could stop them coming to the centre of the city. So that's why it cuts through such a swathe. I mean a whole village was lost in the development of the M8.

That's really crazy. So why did you choose this as Maureen's flat?

Well I mean it's a bit I used to walk down all the time and that was basically one of the very few flats that I thought I might ever be able to afford, because it was very, very cheap here, I think flats were about £30,000. And also most of this street was slightly desolate and not done up, but that was one habitable flat. And I was living in the top floor of a tenement at the time and there is something about the top floor of a tenement flat. You're not as involved in the street, you don't really know everybody, you feel like you're 'above' everything, you are, you probably have rain coming in through your roof and your windows... but there is something really special and quite ethereal about being in a top floor flat and the fact that you have this amazing view out the back windows, I thought that was really kind of special.

[Reading] Maureen dried here eyes impatiently, lit a cigarette, walked over to the bedroom window and threw open the heavy red curtains. Her flat was at the top of Garnethill, the highest hill in Glasgow, and the craggy northside lay before her, polka dotted with cloud shadows. In the street below art students were winding their way up to their morning classes.

Well here we are at what's left of the Glasgow School of Art.

Rennie Mackintosh's masterpiece in scaffolding. It is quite a sight I have to say. This is the heart of Garnethill and that's why it's such a special area. Because the students union is over there and lots of people would hang out there, go and see bands there, or you know what I mean it really became a sort of centre of kind of... weirdos. Do you know what I mean? Like that's where people would meet other folk like them and set up bands together or form art projects together or you know come up with some sort of ill-advised artistic project or theatre project. That's where you would meet people. But it's been on fire twice -

Twice yeah -

And it's a shell, and it's going to be a long time before it's done up I think and back up and operating. I mean I had studied art history at a night class in London when I was working. I did an A Level. And one of the things we talked about was Glasgow Art School. Then you came to Glasgow and nobody was paying any attention to it at all. I don't think you could even get tours of it at that time. You know it was really, there was loads of forgotten beautiful things up there. I moved here from London when I was about nineteen and just kind of fell in love with how ramshackle the city was. This was in '86 and Glasgow was really falling apart then. Which was what I liked about it actually. And you could get, you would rent a ballroom for £20 a week it was like west Berlin, it was unbelievable, it was really unbelievable. And all the buildings had big bushes growing out of them and you know flowers growing out of windowsills and it was really rundown, an apocalyptic vision of Thatcher's Britain you know. And Garnethill was one of the wildest places that I'd ever seen. I couldn't believe people could live so close to the centre of the city. You know because if you lived in London you had to live ten miles from the centre of the town and it took ages to get anywhere.

Right we are heading off to the CCA, another stop that we love to chat about, and you have some history there, or-?

Yeah I went to see, when it was the Third Eye Centre, I went to see the Guerrilla Girls there. The Guerrilla Girls were an activist group who were drawing attention to, they were using art to draw attention to gender disparities in the fine art world. And I went to see them and I was so blown away by them and their project that when I was writing a crime novel with feminist politics in it I called it the Garnethill Guerrilla. But then I sort of realised it's better if you kind of temper that and disguise it a wee bit you know so I just changed it to Garnethill, but it was because I saw the Guerrilla Girls here at the CCA.

So you were really inspired.

I was so inspired by them and their project, you know. That they didn't go into politics; that they were real activists in the sense of artistic, chaotic people who used their energy to try and change things without getting involved in party politics. I think that's really, really important at the moment. And they were such a great - they inspired people all over the world. This view down here where you can actually see all the way, I think that's the Campsies. That was the cover of the very first edition of Garnethill.

Wow.

And it was also the cover of The Less Dead which was the last book. But you can't really see it because of all these flying buttresses of scaffolding holding up what's left of the art school there.

Another testament to how inspired people are by the Garnethill area is that Jackie Kay set her very first novel, Trumpet, right here on Rose Street, well part of it anyway. Her first novel, Trumpet, partly deals with the relationship with a very famous jazz musician called Joss and his wife Millie and Millie's flat was on Rose Street in Garnethill and it was where they first met and where their relationship blossomed. I've heard Jackie Kay speaking about the reason she set it here in Garnethill was because she thought the hills reminded her of San Francisco and she said that the hills were emblematic of Millie's life being quite up and down until she meets Joss and everything comes together. Which I think it just so beautiful with their relationship in that book.

Of course Louise Welsh part of her very first book The Cutting Room there as well. On Rose Street!

Amazing.

There is a photography studio there and that's where the pictures are taken that the central character Rilke is wandering around Garnethill.

I'm up here all the time but it's only when you're actually walking round that you think "oh that's where Trumpet says..." and "that's The Cutting Room..." and "that's Garnethill..." and that's... do you know what I mean? How important it is in literary terms.

When I set the Garnethill books there they put the book Garnethill in quite a lot of the bookshops in London and they had to take it out of the window because Glaswegians kept walking past and coming in and saying to the booksellers "I used to live in Garnethill..." but not buying the book so they had to kind of take it down. Garnethill was a secret that only Glaswegians knew about, and a lot of people had a really romantic association with it.

I love this bit, this view from here. This is the, you look over the M8 to the West End and the Southside and Paisley, it's such a brilliant view and it really gives a sense of Garnethill being in the very centre of the city.

Yeah.

That's Ben Lomond over there. I mean you can see for miles and miles up here.

It's a fantastic view and you know I think it's actually a really great place to end this because it reminds you of all of the histories that are still out there. There's still so much more history out there and the Women's Library do walks all over the city.

Because every four square blocks has probably got as much history as this one small bit.

- As this tiny little bit that we've spoken about today.

Yeah.

This has been fantastic, thank you so much for coming with me.

Thank you so much for having me! I've really loved it, thank you so much Melody.

Yeah me too, thank you.