

## Writing Durham 4 – Mim Skinner

**Introduction** *You're listening to a podcast by New Writing North.*

**Laura McKenzie** When we think of County Durham, we envision miners' strikes and a Norman Cathedral, St. Cuthbert's Shrine with its headless statue, a post-industrial northern landscape, and a world-leading university. It's steeped in history, but we don't tend to talk about County Durham in terms of its literary significance. I'm on a mission to prove that there's more to Durham than meets the eye; that, alongside its medieval city and worked-out pits, the county is home to a rich and varied tradition of literature. Over the past few months, I've been seeking out the writers, books and poems that tell the story of County Durham's literary past and present. And in this podcast series, I'll be speaking to authors and poets who either hail from Durham, or have made it their home. What does it mean, if anything, to be a Durham writer? What role has this place, unique in so many contradictory ways, played in shaping their work?

In this episode, I'm joined by Durham-based writer Mim Skinner, author of the poignant and darkly funny *Jailbird: Lessons from a Women's Prison*. Mim has spent years delivering arts courses in prisons throughout the North East, and today we talk about the stories of the women she met, and the systemic problems that underpin their experience.

*I'm Laura McKenzie, and this is Writing Durham.*

**Mim Skinner** I started REFUSE –

**Laura McKenzie** Oh, I've been saying *RE-fUSE*.

**Mim Skinner** You can call it either, yeah, it actually doesn't matter either way – a year before I start working in prisons. But um, my best friend and I started this project, but it was very much on the side; didn't pay us a thing for two years, or two and a half. So during that time, I was working full time in the prison. So I was always doing the café. But the café morphed into something that could employ me and then support them coming out of prisons, and then employ people. So that's been the...

**Laura McKenzie** It sounds like that's actually been quite symbiotic, in the end.

**Mim Skinner** Very! In a way that I kind of felt like, "Oh God, the café's – the kind of food waste, that has grown so much, I feel like I have to leave the work with women to fully look after it." Because at that time, we were employing a number of people. But it wasn't my job, you know. But actually it hasn't been that at all because we've been able to work with the same women. You know, in fact exactly the same women who were part of the book, in the community, which has been really lovely. And there's a context for that. And it's felt like, yeah, a community that people have been able to be drawn into. So it's felt very, very symbiotic. Good word! Woo – trust you to be good at the words!

**Laura McKenzie** So for the people who haven't read the book, what is the work that you were doing in the prison?

**Mim Skinner** I was an arts facilitator and chaplaincy assistant.

**Laura McKenzie** Is it Creative Industries, the group that you lead? So yes, that covered a broad range of art, obviously, then...

**Mim Skinner** We also ran something called 'the engagement contract', which was pre-classroom. So that was wing-based – basically the kind of clubs and socks of the prison, although I wouldn't say it like that, because that makes it sound like you're gonna get sort of Daily Mail – but yeah, that it was to engage people on the wings who were very, very secluded, and then bring the classroom. So I ran, yeah, I guess, just arts both in and out of the classroom. Yeah.

**Laura McKenzie** Were you already writing? Were you a writer then – were you writing during...?

**Mim Skinner** Not – I wasn't writing anything to do with prison. So I got the job because I was doing a lot of performance poetry, and I helped to run a feminist arts group called Radical Artists, which was very short lived. And so that was my kind of experience with the arts. I'd always done blogging. I was a kind of, like, a bit of a blogger, on the like...

**Laura McKenzie** Why are you putting it like that, in such a...

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, no, because it's such a funny little thing, because it was a very, very niche, kind of millennial liberal Christians. That was my market, cornered. Which at the time, I felt like a big fish, but then I realised there's only about 10 of us. So I was talking to another sort of six. And I lived with most of them. So, um, but at the time, I imagined myself to be quite a blogger. And I spoke at about two festivals and thought it was very trendy, but I mean, looking back on it now I'm like, lol, I ever thought I blogged. So I did for a bit. Yeah. But the book was totally conceived after I'd finished working there. And just through conversations with friends that were saying, like, "Oh, some of the stories you tell are really shocking." You know, "Why doesn't anyone know about it?" And then one of those people that I spoke to about it was my commissioning editor, Emily, who ended up being the editor of the book. And she... I kind of said, "I don't think it's going to be possible." And she did a lot of exploration into the legalities of it with her legal team at the publisher and with the MoJ. And that led to her being like, "Right, well, it's possible now. So off you go."

**Laura McKenzie** Like, "These are the parameters, and this is how you can do it"?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah. So I wouldn't – I actually, I never kind of meant to write one and in many ways it bizarrely fell in my lap, in that somebody was like, "I think people need to know these stories. I've worked out how you can do it. I'm gonna be your register. We've got to do it," you know. And so I was kind of like, "Whoa." Like, recently, I've been having conversations with other journalists – things like: "How do I pitch an article? What happens when you want to write something? How do you tell people you want to write it?" And they're like, "Well, of course, you have an agent." And I'm like, "Oh, interesting. I'll write that down." And they're like, "How the hell have you got a book out? You know nothing."

**Laura McKenzie** The book itself, like a lot of books I love, it's an amalgamation of forms. So you're telling people stories, but you've also got people telling their own stories. Did you always know it was gonna be like that? Did that just feel like what felt right to you, in terms of, 'Vivian has a guest chapter'?

**Mim Skinner** No, it was really organic. The guests were just people that I was working with, who said... so I did a lot of read-throughs to people, and just said, "Oh, why don't you have a look at what I'm reading and check if it kind of feels right." And yeah, spent some time with the women being like, "What do you think?" And a couple of them said, "Ah, yeah, can I write a bit too?" And I was like, "Great. Yeah. Perfect." So we have three guest sections, which are all just really wonderful. Also they're really varied and give you a bit of a break from my kind of writing style, which I think is nice. As somebody with a short attention span, I feel like I need variety. No, I don't mean that it's self-deprecating way. I just think that's nice, isn't it?

**Laura McKenzie** It's just very engaging. And I think the aim, as the subtitle suggests, *Lessons from a Women's Prison*, you want to hear... obviously, you're telling us what these women are saying, but having them say in their own words, it just, I think that really leans into that project of kind of speaking the truth about the system and how the system is quite often broken. At least that's the impression I got from the book anyway. Was that the main drive? Is that the main lesson?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, pretty much. The kind of analogy I give over and over is that we are all in the criminal justice system, working on, you know, different parts of a car like mechanics, and there's a kind of fantastic wheel-shining team, and someone else doing really rad body work and, you know, fantastic steering gear person – but you step back and you realise that the engine's gone. And however shiny you make the wheels and however slick the paintwork, you know it's not going to take you to where you want to go. And for me, that was what it was like working in the criminal justice system. You know, you really give everything to supporting somebody, whether it's just after release or while they're in prison. But actually, that didn't mean a lot terms of sustained change if we had these really systemic problems that framed

everything we were doing. You know, I think one of the big things that I was challenged on when I came in prison is knowing who we were imprisoning, as a country. So they get kind of quoted an awful lot, but actually, the fact that a third of our female prison estate are people that have come from the care system: that's an appalling systemic problem. You know, the idea, then, that we can kind of do a bit of a sticking plaster approach, put on some jolly activities in prison, and their life's gonna turn around, is really unrealistic. And yeah, I guess the book was born out of a frustration that we're all carefully attending this broken car. And I wanted to, yeah, be a person who sort of put the paintbrush down, or the spanner, and step back and said, "Hey, I think the engine's gone." I know there's lots and lots of people doing that, you know, don't get me wrong. I'm certainly not playing a shiny role in that – there's some just incredible researchers, academics, campaigners – but what I can do is storytelling and I kind of wanted to offer that.

**Laura McKenzie** I think the – I'm going to call it Veggie-gate episode, where the vegetables the residents were growing, these incredible giant veg, and they were just going into making compost because of security reasons. They couldn't be taken out. Is that right?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

**Laura McKenzie** What was that? So people, there was a chance that they could be communicating with the vegetables? Or...

**Mim Skinner** So some of the things, I think, you know, like saying there's some really systemic problems. There are things that happen that have always happened, and this is the rule, and you're not really allowed to say like, "What? Well, that's ridiculous." Particularly under our first governor. Our new governor is actually someone who does ask difficult questions, and she's someone who changed the place a lot. But certainly, in those first days, there wasn't a kind of route by which we could say... like, you wouldn't, in any other business – you know, I run a business now, and we're frequently, *daily*, saying, "What could we be doing better? Let's review. Let's review. Let's look at our outcomes. What outcomes have gone well? What's unexpected? How can we change round the staff teams?" That's what you do when you run a

project. That is not necessarily happening in all branches of the criminal justice system. I guess 'cause it's such a big beast, you know. I said that in a bit of a smug way, like my tiny project in Chester Le Street could teach something to the criminal justice system, which employs thousands and thousands of people. I'm sure that isn't true. I, we, could never run something that big. But I do think it is important to be reviewing what works.

**Laura McKenzie** Yeah, I think it was just a really good example of just something being essentially nonsensical, and actually damaging. And in terms of... people talk a lot about empowerment, and the activities the residents do being empowering; how horrendous to put all this energy into growing a beautiful, giant leek, and have it just be composted. And I think, so I'm going to do this very annoying thing where I quote you, but you said, fighting that fight about the veg did something to combat the low-level constant sense of inadequacy that you had felt, working in the prisons. But that's just something that you can't help but take on, very personally, even though it is the system, and you are doing what you can do and what you're there to do. But that must be a constant emotional and psychological battle, if you feel like you keep hitting up against this wall.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, partly, and I think that is what lots of creatives have in common, is that you want to kind of ask why, and poke and see what's behind. And partly, I think it also displays my lack of boundaries. Famously poor boundaries. And I think I couldn't sort of leave alone and be apart. And sometimes that isn't a good thing. You just need to do a task and realise you're not this kind of Superman character that's going to reform everything, and actually, it's doing quite well already, thank you very much. And so there's something in that that I think lots and lots of creatives share, where you can't necessarily be your cog in the system without sort of having a poke around and seeing how else it could work or what could be different. But also I do think that reflects, in myself, I guess a lack of boundaries. Also quite creative thing, to be honest, lots of creatives are like that in that I wasn't able to do my job and go home and forget about it. And actually, now I'm part of a team that employs people, I love those guys, the ones that can just come in and do the task, and not unearth and poke around – just finish the task and go home. And now I'm like, "I want to employ those guys. That's so great." And I'm also very much not one of them. We all have our different skills.

**Laura McKenzie** This is true. You mentioned, before, the governor, and one of the more positive changes that you chronicle in the book is the shift from the previous governor to the one that is – is she still there now?

**Mim Skinner** Yes.

**Laura McKenzie** So how much of that was to do with gender, do you think? Or is it just a new person?

**Mim Skinner** It's difficult to know because there are very good and progress-focused male governors, but in my mind one of the most powerful things that she brought was an understanding of what it is to be a woman, and what some of the challenges were that are really gender specific. And one of the things that she did, that I wrote about when she came in, is changed some of the language that we use: talked about people as residents rather than prisoners; or repainting the prison gates, which were grey, in kind of suffragette purple and green; and introduce, yeah, new programmes and things. How much of that was to do with her having just an increased understanding of a very female space, and how much of that was just because she was a good manager, I don't know. But I do think it is a significant thing that women, and women in prison, are most often – or, in fact, across the criminal justice system, whether we're talking about police or prisons – are very, very frequently handled in a very male system, and one which is very designed for men, designed by men. And that's not kind of unusual, in that only 5% of people in the criminal justice system are women. So it's kind of very designed for men. But I think, her being a woman just brought a very different dynamic.

**Laura McKenzie** Yeah. Language, I feel as well, throughout – what part of your book being an amalgamation of different forms is, you have glossaries, as well, of useful terms. And I was thinking about language and how it can include and exclude, and things like – Vivian, she talks about going into the prison and the residents who've been there longer knowing the jail talk, having the lingo. And just this meeting of the two languages, one quite idiomatic, and one quite

bureaucratic. And just how language functions in that space, I thought was interesting. I think – I don't know how it – maybe that's not really a question; more of a statement.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, it was. In many ways I approached that in the same way as I think a lot of people do when they go to new environments or challenges, in that I was kind of fascinated by this subculture of language and subculture of ideas. And I just – sorry, remind me what I called her again? I've forgotten her... I'm remembering her real name, the woman who –

**Laura McKenzie** Vivian? [checks]

**Mim Skinner** Vivian. Yeah. And, yeah, so Vivian's a really interesting case. Because in the book, she reflects on her first time in jail, and she's in her teens. And the Vivian that I know now – I still see her – actually that culture and that language has more and more become hers and become the one that she speaks. So for me, I find it quite interesting hearing from her about a time where that felt new and a time where that felt scary. And I guess, yeah, just reflecting with her on what became her new normal. And actually, Blackie is someone who was very well known, and very well liked and a bit of a character. And between writing that chapter and the book coming out, she died of an overdose. And so her family read the book and were able to, kind of, read her story. And I've spoken with her family about how important that was, that even though she's not here and died in really sad circumstances, she had such a powerful voice. And people often say, like, "Oh, actually, what Blackie had to say was amazing, really important." But the fact is that more than one of the women who I was with on that journey, writing the book, have now died. And I do think it's important to recognise that, and I've been quite hopeful in the book, because I do think there are really important stories of hope. But also it's just so important to recognise that that isn't always how the journey ends. You know, it doesn't end at the end of the chapter.

**Laura McKenzie** Yeah. Because in the book, her story – she reoffends, doesn't she? But purposefully. But when she's telling you her story, you're sitting in the car aren't you. It's a lovely moment, like, I could see that conversation taking place. And she's moved past that, well, had seemed to be past that.



**Mim Skinner** Yeah.

**Laura McKenzie** But yeah, it is a hopeful story in the book.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, it's hopeful. And she's a very hopeful person.

**Laura McKenzie** She sounds like good fun.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, oh yeah. Oh drama! We'd just, in the chapter, come back from a women's camping trip. We went on our second one this year, our annual women's camping trip. And it would have been just so dramatic and chaotic. And just, everyone Tarzaning about the forest. You know, it was a really, really fun and lovely trip. And so she was really good fun. Yeah, she's very missed.

**Laura McKenzie** The chapter where you're painting the underwater scene in the seg – is that the correct language?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, yeah.

**Laura McKenzie** That just struck me as – it felt like that was a space where you were in this little pod with the residents; just a very calm, almost a safe space where you're doing this painting. And that, I think one of the undercurrents of the book, although you're unflinchingly honest about the traumas that these women have suffered, and you say yourself, I think, one of the main lessons that you include at the end of the book is that crying doesn't happen in a vacuum. But it was just consistently underpinned by humour, including some real laugh-out-loud moments. And I'd love love love – and I hope I've got this right – but in that chapter where they're talking there, you are talking about the things the women, the residents, are looking forward to when they get out. And, is it Danielle?, starts talking about Wobble the Donkey?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah.

**Laura McKenzie** Like, literally I snorted on the bus. I just love that fucking donkey.

**Mim Skinner** It's so unexpected, you know? That doesn't conform to the narrative that we have of women in prison, her just being absolutely desperate to get out to this donkey that she's got. I don't know anyone that's got a donkey.

**Laura McKenzie** Yeah, but was that... so when I think about human in that setting, I think of kind of resilience and strength and it being used as a tool for that. And it felt like quite an intimate conversation in that space, when you're doing that painting and what have you. But is that something that's just throughout those relationships, and throughout the prison, it's just humour is being used like that, and it is in fact – what am I trying to say? Not that they're having a good time, but it's not all doom and gloom, and people are laughing and having fun. Because it seemed like that from the book.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, and I think that is an important part of what happens, is that people form friendships. And one of the kind of, the two narratives, I guess, you always hear about prisons is that people are the kind of, these defeated misery memoirs of, you know, poor old victims; or you get the kind of neglectful mum, evil woman, you know, hateful witch – all that kind of thing. And actually, neither of those hold any water and the nuance is that you have people who've gone through really rough experiences, who have all been put together, and there's love and humour as well as sadness and disappointment, just like any humans, you know.

**Laura McKenzie** The work you're doing now with REfUSE – how many of the residents that you work with in the prisons are now part of that community? And has that been part of the growth of that enterprise?

**Mim Skinner** Hmm. Mix and match. So I will just quickly explain the different hats I wear with REfUSE. There's a lot hats. So at the REfUSE premises, which is in Chester Le Street, we have a training programme and a volunteer programme – it's a pay-as-you-feel café. And on that same premises is the charity Handcrafted, and I also run the Women's Project for

Handcrafted – so we provide housing for difficult to house women, so it might be people that have come from hostel, people that have come from prison. And as well as support groups, cookery lessons would work, signposting to different things, support around an addiction, support around parenting. So that kind of all goes on in a muddle in the café. And that's through Handcrafted or through REfUSE. I guess the thing about having a really open space is that it's meant that lots of women who I've maybe tried to keep in touch with, but they might not have a phone, or be in and out of homelessness, or find it difficult to make an appointment: if I'm just in a café that's really front-facing, lots of these women come and pop by. So we have lots of women who come to our support group, but we also have people who have their contact with their child just in the café, and that's a safe space for that, or who come and get a lunch, or who practice a skill, learn cookery. So it's difficult to give you a bit of a number. At least kind of 10, 15 women a week who've spent time in prison or in the criminal justice system are around and about at the café in some capacity. We have four women's houses now. And also have a programme where we train people up through Handcrafted, and then hopefully employ them in private catering that we do, also food that would otherwise go to waste. So it's been – yeah, amazing that almost rather than saying, you know, “Do you want to engage with this programme?” we've been able to say, “Well, would you like to be a part of this community?” And the community at the café, running through it is, you know, very much an amazing mix of people who are in the drug and alcohol recovery communities, and adults who have learning difficulties, people who've been long-term unemployed or isolated, or for whatever reason found themselves to be in need of a bit of community, whether that's just for a meal, or whether that's for engaging every day of the week in something different. So the café has been a real gift. And has felt like a continuation of the work I was doing rather than like, “Well, I've stopped in the prison now.” And partly because it's the exact same women in a lot of cases that I was working with inside, but also because, yeah, we're meeting with and working with women who have been in the criminal justice system, or gone through some of the same things around domestic violence or addiction that those women had, and providing a space for these women too.

**Laura McKenzie** Do you do any creative writing stuff?

**Mim Skinner** I do a little bit in the café. So we run an artist group in the café. But that, to be honest, has sort of segued into being everything from, you know, bread baking to knitting. I support a couple of women just individually, mentoring them around writing. But my kind of official prison writing role is now in a men's prison. I'm doing a writing residency up in Northumberland, which is very, very different work to working with women, and not my forté, but it's been an amazing experience anyway.

**Laura McKenzie** What you talk about in the book, one of the chapters, is when you answer secondment doing the creative writing programme in a men's prison, and you say there that there's a huge disparity between how their spaces function, and almost what the mood is like, unsurprisingly.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, yeah.

**Laura McKenzie** Because you work in between two wings – wings probably isn't the right word.

**Mim Skinner** That's right. Oh, so there's sort of about 10 wings. But yeah, two sections. They're what's called the VP side – vulnerable persons – and the Mains. So yeah, different crimes, different sense of place.

**Laura McKenzie** What was the end product of that creative writing programme? Was it an in-house publication?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, so last time it wasn't in-house publication. This time, now you can... in fact, this – I don't know about when the podcast's out to be honest – but at the time of recording, you can go down to Newcastle Cathedral and see some of the poetry we've been writing recently in Northumberland displayed. Yeah.

**Laura McKenzie** Oh fantastic! So what role do you feel like, what did that bring to that community, that space to do the creative writing. Because I'm trained by *The Reader*, so I know about doing shared reading in prisons, but I'm not a creative writer. So...

**Mim Skinner** A lot of the work we were doing was providing people with the words to say how they felt. So one of the kind of experiences I write about in the book is doing a collaborative pantomime writing session. And we weren't able to kind of put a script together because people didn't have the words to describe the feelings that they meant, and so we spent some time just writing down lists of words and describing feelings and putting a vocabulary to people's emotional expression. And that felt incredibly important, just in terms of people being able to say, "Yeah, that's the word. Yeah, that's what I'm – that's how I'm feeling. That's how this experience has been for me." And often women in prison have had a very disrupted education or have – not everyone, you know, there are people from lots of different backgrounds – but typically problems around literacy are much, much more pronounced in a prison context than in any school context. I guess partly linked to the fact that so many women in prison have been abused as children: half have been abused as children; you know, a third are from the care system. So that kind of time of learning and working out the words to say how you feel is just very disrupted, often. So that's a really powerful thing in terms of writing, people being able to gain a vocabulary for emotional expression. And the other thing that felt quite important was helping people to get into the practice of diary writing, as a way of processing emotions. And I guess having a degree of freedom in a place which is quite restrictive, you know. No one can stop you thinking and writing. But also, yeah, I guess people being able to share with others how they felt, even if that's kind of putting together a poem for your kids about missing them. And that's a really important thing, being able to get that done and send that out.

**Laura McKenzie** So you suggested diary writing and that, kind of like, private craft, as it were? Or not craft, but just that private dialogue with yourself. There's actually a section of the book where you quote an extract from your counselling journal. Is that something that comes with the role, that you have counselling as part of – is that just standard, or is that something you sort yourself? What made you want to include that in the book?

**Mim Skinner** Hmm. I worked for a really fantastic charity, a prison charity based in Newcastle, and they gave me counselling and time for counselling as part of my role, and were just very, very good in how they looked after us and supported us with our mental health. And it's not available, typically, to other prison staff, and, for me, was incredibly helpful. So I didn't know what the story would have looked like. I think it should be, yeah, I think it should be. And yeah, it's interesting saying, why did you include that? I actually didn't include it initially. And my editor was saying, like, "You're sounding a bit, like, it's a book, like you're breezing through these incredibly difficult things because you're not saying like, 'Oh, my gosh, this, how this left me?'" And my thought was just like, "Oh, I don't want to weave that through the stories. They're not, you know, not all the stories are about me." They're seen through my lens and spoken through my voice, but actually, in the end of the day, it's not about how the teacher feels about teaching the class. You know, my experience wasn't the point. And she said that it felt quite important to have a bit of my reaction and what it looks like for someone who's had quite a charmed upbringing to come across and experience real trauma and other people, and what my reaction to that was. Which was kind of why we included that section.

**Laura McKenzie** No, I think that's very powerful. And yeah, it does feel like that's something that should be available to everyone working in that context.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, I guess so. I didn't really think about it at the time. Because I kind of, I guess, started on that road thinking that it was, you know, so other people could understand about the prison service. But actually, one of the things that happened while I was writing is I was able to kind of frame and put together some of the experiences. Yeah, it's funny putting things in a book because you have these sort of very tied-up vignettes where you kind of introduced the problem and the narrative's solved in, you know, five pages. And actually, that's even the stories that end well in the book. If I could tell you what was happening with them now, the Happy Ending would seem a kind of sort of trite tying up. Even though, at the time, I probably felt that was much more final. So in many ways, it is therapeutic, but also, I guess, you try to frame what went on in this narrative arc where it doesn't actually cleanly fit, so I guess some of it's been wedged into a narrative arc. And also some of it happened across two

years that was condensed and compiled. Lots of the stories and the people were collated. So it is yeah, I guess it's a kind of funny thing to put those experiences into 60,000 words. But yeah, it was also really important for me, I think.

**Laura McKenzie** Because there are those moments, those pauses, in the book where you take yourself off for a little walk. And that's when you came across the veg, isn't it? You're taking a moment and wandering, trying to find the gardens. And then is it the men's prison, you go and sit with the goats?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah. A few weeks ago, I went to sit with the goats. And somebody – I was just walking alongside the goat enclosure, which is very, it's like public in the prison. Yeah. And somebody said, "Excuse me, can you tell where you're going?" And I thought, oh, God I can't even sit with a goat, you know. But I just think that's so indicative of prison culture, that if you sort of just slightly walk, you know, even with my key belt and my lanyard and all the rest of it, 10 metres off the beaten track. Looking at some goats. Yeah, you think everyone's very suspicious. It is honestly, it's the antithesis of a creative flexible environment, where your set of – people are quite suspicious of anything which is not the designated activities. But actually, there's really lovely gardens by the goats. There's beautiful flowers planted out and I just thought, "oddly, none of the staff have come to look at the garden, either. It's just that kind of environment isn't it.

**Laura McKenzie** Were you able – you include in the book a letter asking the governor, maybe, if you can bring in your rabbits? Therapy rabbits. Were you able to bring the rabbit in?

**Mim Skinner** No rabbit. But there were dogs.

**Laura McKenzie** Oh. Instead of rabbits.

**Mim Skinner** Yes, Stray Aid bring the dogs in. But the rabbit was a no.

**Laura McKenzie** That's a shame.

**Mim Skinner** But yeah, the rabbit was great. I used to bring the rabbit round to an art class that my mum ran with adults with learning difficulties, and the rabbit was very popular. So it was, frankly, a shame that poor Winston was made redundant by the prison service. He's long since died, but, you know, their loss really.

**Laura McKenzie** Absolutely. Great rabbit name.

**Mim Skinner** Thank you.

**Laura McKenzie** So can I ask you what you like to read?

**Mim Skinner** At the moment, I am reading a fantastic autobiography by a drag queen who set up something called *Denim*, which is a drag troupe. And they're called Amrou, and describe themselves as a Muslim drag queen and describe experiences, and growing up in quite a strict Muslim family, and then questioning their gender identity and sexuality from a young age. And it's just so honest and powerful and readable and just gorgeous.

**Laura McKenzie** So top tip?

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, I'm really enjoying that. And recently, I've been – I've never been to a literary festival before, but I've just done a run of six. And so I've picked up quite a lot of books there, things I wouldn't necessarily read, but have very much enjoyed. And – I'm trying to think – I've read a very short, kind of easy to read, novel called *Apple and Rain*, about mother-daughter relationships. That was quite sweet.

**Laura McKenzie** That's a beautiful title.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah, it was nice. And I just bought yesterday – I feel very, very pleased with myself – the new collection of short stories by Zadie Smith. And I'm pleased with myself



because it was £20 pounds, but had a small tear in the cover, and so it was reduced to £5.  
And I still, I think at the moment...

**Laura McKenzie**

Did you haggle or was it already--

**Mim Skinner**

No haggling, no haggling, in Waterstones. And I do think to myself, I can't buy many more hardbacks, because they are very expensive – £20 a book and I say that as someone whose hardback costs £17 currently; there is a paperback next year. So I felt very, very pleased with myself this week.

**Laura McKenzie**

As you should.

**Mim Skinner**

Thank you very much.

**Laura McKenzie** Are you working on anything else?

**Mim Skinner**

Yeah, well at the moment. I've just had a couple of pieces of journalism come out, long reads. Over the weekend, I had two come out. And one was about how working with women who've really experienced oppression changed my views around feminism, which had been quite, sort of, cross-legged, mansplaining, radar, Frida Kahlo, collective, airy fairy, university feminism, and actually, which almost was completely irrelevant to the context of working in a prison, and actually very inaccessible. So I've written earlier this week, yesterday, for *The Guardian* on that. And I've also been writing – I had a piece in *The Sunday Times* this Sunday, writing about my experiences of grief. I'm someone who lost both my parents in my 20s, and so I'm writing a little bit about the experience of sisters, and how having sisters has been really important and transformational. So I'm thinking my lines I'm writing around are around the experience of

women, but also writing a bit more about death and grief at the moment. And I have a couple of ideas for things. But I guess, I find it quite hard to have space to think of new ideas, because I'm still kind of full-time support, working, running a social enterprise...

**Laura McKenzie** You sound like a very busy human, Mim.

**Mim Skinner** Well, I'm not coming up with the new ideas, you know. I think, actually, creative thought, is such a luxury.

**Laura McKenzie** It requires so much space. Yeah.

**Mim Skinner** Hmm. And I do think, like, this is the reason, actually, there aren't that many kind of pieces of work coming out of prison, because no one's got any time to think? Like, it's such a luxury of having a bit of space and time. And it's been amazing that I've had some kind of space to think about those, but at the moment, I sort of, in a very, very Billy Basic way, I've literally been writing about my immediate experiences, like prison death, and people are like, "Oh, are you gonna write any fiction?" But I don't know if I could think of anything.

**Laura McKenzie** Do you have a background in fiction, as well? You're a poet.

**Mim Skinner** Oh, yeah, but I'm not really. I'm not a poet in any meaningful way. I was one of those, one of many people who fancies themselves as a bit of a performance poet and does the odd kind of overdramatic reading down the pub. But I think that was, to call myself a poet, a bit inflated. No, no – yeah, yeah, I'm pretty much Kae Tempest, just on the sideline. No, that's kind. I mean, thank you. I'll take it. But that is, yeah, I don't know how much I could go on to claim that. Writing is something that I love, and I find really enjoyable and therapeutic. It is something which is rarely my most immediate thing. And in many ways, I'd love it to be because I find it so enjoyable. I know some people say that's a myth. And, like, "every writer finds it really painful and hard". But writing is easy. I mean, that sounds mean, like, on people who don't say that. If you think writing is hard, be a support worker, honestly. I'm not that impressed by anyone who's like, "Oh, God, poor me. I've had a terrible time writing my novel."

God what absolute joy to have the headspace, you know? People who are struggling to survive don't write novels. Writing novels is very much higher up that old hierarchy of needs, and I feel very, very privileged whenever I get to have the luxury of sitting and writing. That feels like just a real treat. And sorry, that sounded actually really cruel. Writing is really important, I'm sorry.

**Laura McKenzie** But no – we have the conversation here at New Writing North, quite often, that working in the subsidised arts is a luxury, because of the pay infrastructure and what have you – and it's generally middle-class, white people, especially in the North. And there is an element of it being having space to do that creative work and that kind of ... yeah, it is a luxury.

**Mim Skinner** But also very, very essential.

**Laura McKenzie** Very essential.

**Mim Skinner** Yeah. And no shade on anyone who gives themselves nice chunks of time to write things, because that is never going to be a bad thing. And perhaps we all should be giving ourselves nice chunks of time to write things.

**Laura McKenzie** Agreed. On that note, thank you very much for giving us a wonderful book and for coming into chat.

**Mim Skinner** Ah, thank you so much for having me Laura, it's been lovely.

## **Acknowledgements**

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