



## **The Scrapbook History Podcast**

### **Episode 5**

### **Life writing with scissors**

Cherish Watton:

Welcome back to the Scrapbook History Podcast with me, your host and scrapbook scholar, Cherish Watton.

Some of you who are listening to this podcast have probably been scrapbookers yourselves. You might have made books on a special holiday, trip, or at the end of school or university, or to mark a special event such as a wedding or birth. If you have, then you have joined thousands, if not tens of thousands of scrapbookers who have come before you. Researchers who spend their time looking at scrapbooks understand these personal volumes as a form of life “writing with scissors”, to borrow an evocative phrase from scrapbook academic Ellen Gruver Garvey.

Life writing takes many forms from published and unpublished diaries, biographies, autobiographies, poetry, and more visual sources such as comics. Often overlooked, however, are scrapbooks which resonate with each of these more recognized types of life writing. Writing with their scissors, scrapbookers transform clippings, photographs, and objects to say something about different parts of their life as represented on the page. Some scrapbookers attempt to document exceptional moments in their life (weddings, holidays, or other special events), some focus on the more everyday sides of life, while still others collect items that speak to a life wished for but not yet lived. Whatever the case, each scrapbook is a performative reflection of the scrapbooker, what they value, and the story they want to tell.

Whatever form the scrapbook takes, as we’ve seen in earlier episodes of the podcast, lots of people in the past have turned to scrapbooks as a form of life writing: from celebrities, their fans, politicians, campaigners, school children, historians and more. Indeed, we can see that different groups have been attracted to scrapbooking as a source of life writing precisely because of how it differs from other forms of life writing. To some scrapbookers, the prospect of sitting down and relaying their life in their own words is too overwhelming - possessing neither the time, inclination, or maybe even the literary or language skills to reflect on their life in this way. Instead, speaking through personal

objects, photographs, clipped items, and often even other people's words, allows a freedom of expression. Some other people may see the prospect of writing explicitly about their life as too self-indulgent or as telling a story that is not important.

When looking at histories of Western societies, there is a trend towards those from marginalised backgrounds, especially women and Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority groups, to be made to feel this way, as well as many individuals from marginalised backgrounds being blocked from the means of publication that more traditional life writers aspire to. For these individuals who might never explicitly write about their own life experience, but who chose to scrapbook, scrapbooks become an even more valuable form of life writing.

Considering the importance of scrapbooking as a medium of life writing for people who are marginalised, I would love to be able to point you to an article, book, or even blog post that considers scrapbooking by Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority communities in Britain. Unfortunately I've not come across anything substantial so far in my research journey (and I'd love to hear from listeners who have come across interesting material on this - so please do get in touch if this is the case). In future episodes, we'll be exploring the implications of there being so little written on scrapbooks made by these communities and also address that this gap in scholarship does not reflect the reality of scrapbooking history.

In the meantime, however, the work of Ellen Gruber Garvey on American scrapbooking practices is immensely helpful. If you've not got a copy of 'Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance, then I can't recommend her research on scrapbooking enough! Her book, in her own words, explores "not only scrapbooks of public figures but also how people in positions of relative powerlessness used their scrapbooks to make a place for themselves and their communities by finding, sifting, analyzing, and recirculating writing that mattered to them".

In a chapter dedicated to African American communities, Garvey describes how scrapbooks made of clippings from both black and (often hostile) white presses allowed late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century communities to write their own histories against the racist structures that oppressed them and transforming the scrapbooks into a "weapon and communal knowledge". In the pages of their scrapbooks, prominent figures such as the avid collector and archivist Alexander Gumby, compiled volumes full of clippings recording racial struggles and pride and showing how African Americans and other Black Americans had been "active agents" in American histories, despite being excluded from national narratives of the American nation. On a similar theme, Cynthia Greenlee has also written a fascinating piece for *The Atlantic* on the scrapbooking habits of William Henry Dorsey, a nineteenth-century Philadelphian who made nearly 400 scrapbooks out of existing scrapbooks and wallpaper books, bulging with neatly-pasted clippings which "represent a bricolage of one man's far-ranging interest in African American history and

culture”.

Scrapbooking then fulfilled a distinct and empowering role as a form of life and history writing and is still available in this capacity today. And it's this theme of empowerment and scrapbooking that resonates throughout my interview with Syma Ahmed. Syma works as Development Officer for the Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority women's project at Glasgow Women's Library. For several years, Syma has run a series of 'Life Book' scrapbooking-style scrapbooking sessions with participants in Glasgow.

Cherish Watton: Well, it's brilliant to welcome you onto the podcast today, Syma. Could you talk to us a bit about your role at Glasgow Women's Library to begin with?

Syma Ahmed: Hi there. So my role at the library, my job title is development worker for the Black and Minority Ethnic Project. That just entails coming up with project ideas, developing projects for women's groups across Glasgow. But we work with all women at the library. But my project focuses on adapting the learning that we do at the library and our resources, and making it adapted to the needs of BME women's groups across Glasgow. So that's my role. And I work under the banner of the Creative Learning Projects at the library, lifelong learning.

Cherish Watton: That's great. Thank you very much for that introduction. For, I guess, people who haven't heard much about Glasgow Women's Library, could you tell us a bit about your organization and what makes it quite unique?

Syma Ahmed: So Glasgow Women's Library, we're a unique library. Our collection focuses on the lives of women and the contributions that they have made. All our books are by women, and a lot of our collection's donated, which is quite nice. So people come in from maybe having looked through the loft and got a collection of lovely books by women. And they've come in and donated their personal collection to the library. And apart from that, we also get books through other means. We've got a very small budget where we need to get books in. But generally speaking, it's all based on donations. So there's certain books that you won't get in other libraries, but you'll find at the Women's Library.

: We also have our archive collection as well. So we are continuously recording and documenting histories of women. But also developing our collection and looking at what's missing, what needs to be there. And just really that women are represented and are celebrated. We've got a substantial events programme. We do lots of different events with authors, a lot of collaborative work with other organizations. And it's really obviously the theme is about women, women empowerment, women's stories. And we also do lots of group work as well, and that's where my role comes in. We do it myself and a couple of my colleagues go out and work with groups in outreach work. And basically it could be anything that is affecting women or of interest to women. so it could be International Women's Day, Refugee Week. We mark Black History Month and Violence Against Women, these are just some of the themes that we cover and we will work with different women across Glasgow.

My groups are usually women from the black and multi-ethnic background. Some groups are a fair mix of age range, but you tend to have mostly the mums. They'll have the school drop offs and they'll come. And they've got that window of between nine and three o'clock to come to workshops. Then you'll have the over sixties. So they group together. Like I said, all from different backgrounds. Some particular groups, like the one that I'm working with just now, the majority are from the South Asian background. It's the second group that I work with in Glasgow South Side. Then there's for example, Medical Integration, they meet, that's a fairly mixed group. You've got women from all over the world, different backgrounds.

You've got African women, you've got women from the Middle East, South Asia, women that are from here, born here, but maybe from a Pakistani background or Indian or Chinese, so I think there's some fairly mixed groups. Others are quite like you have maybe an Indian women's group and a Muslim women's group. And the younger ones, for example, the timings would be the evening that we'd meet them. And workshops, we've worked with some groups that are youth groups, and they'll be after five o'clock that we'd meet them, again from different backgrounds. Throughout the work that I do as well, I'll try and put on integrated events as well, so although pockets of groups I'm working with that are from that particular BME community, every so often in the year, I'll organise sessions where we are bringing different groups in together, and also people from the Scottish indigenous community, just everyone to have a selective event.

Cherish Watton: It sounds fantastic then in terms of the range of work that you're doing in the library, the archives, and then outreach and engagement. I guess, with such an interesting organisation then, can you tell us a bit about the history of Glasgow Women's Library? Because it seems to be fulfilling a really important role in terms of collecting, but also sharing the work that you're doing with lots of different communities. Can you tell us a bit about how it was set up and why it was set up in the first place?

Syma Ahmed: Yeah, so this is going back 30 years. In fact, this is us celebrating this year our 30th anniversary, so we've got lots of lovely events to mark that. So yeah, this is where it came from. It was Women in Profile that were taking place in the late '80s, early '90s in Glasgow. And they had represented as part of the women in profile artists and women creatives in that time. They had this lovely collection that they put together an exhibition. And I think from there, the realisation that more so like what do we do with all of this at the end of this Women in Profile, and we just felt that there was a space needed to house the work of women, celebrate their stories, there wasn't enough done, so that's where the idea came from. And it just basically starts off like any other organization just starting off very small, and it was volunteer based.

We didn't have a space as such. You just started off really with those early members doing work from their homes. And eventually they got a space just up at the Garnet Hill area where the Glasgow School of Artists, they had like a little

space there at the bottom of the street. And from there we started gathering things. People started donating, there was a whole collection coming together and then we just moved. We just moved on from there to different venues. As an organization, we had to get established as a charity and a company. And yeah, so it just started maybe our first staff member then volunteers. So it kind of went on from there and that's where it flown ever since.

Cherish Watton: Sounds a real snowball effect. Then from that very small exhibition to begin with and work to now collecting such important papers, and representing women in so many different ways.

Syma Ahmed: I think the passion has always been there. I think that's, what's drove the organization in terms of who we are, our values and our ethos. And I think that's really still very strong today. But the team that we have anybody new joining the library is a real sense of sisterhood, and doing a lot of good feminist work here in this space.

Cherish Watton: That sounds absolutely wonderful. I guess then thinking about your 30 years as an organization and then your role, what are some of the highlights for you in your career so far?

Syma Ahmed: Yeah, so I've worked on different projects all since I've in place. I've been working here for over 12, 13 years now, so it's been a long time. I've really enjoyed documenting stories of migrant women in Glasgow. So although the library everywhere is documenting and celebrating stories and oral histories and whatnot, I think when I came my role as a BME development worker, it was about also including stories of other diverse communities and ensuring that their stories are also included as part of the Scottish story. So that was something the heritage projects, which I worked on that was a pleasure to work on. One of my earliest projects, was she settled in the Shields and that was documenting stories of migrant women in the Polish Shields area. So quite a diverse area in the Glasgow South Side, and previously before at the moment that we've got a lot of South Asian over the past few years, south Asian communities that have settled there.

But previous to that, we had the Jewish community and the Irish and all the waves of migration that have been coming into Glasgow. They've also gone through key areas and they've also passed through Polish Shields as well. So it was quite a nice area to be looking at, and I'm from the area as well, which is great. So it just helped easier for me to connect with the women there and the people there. And it's a lot, I learned about the area in itself. And so I really enjoyed that project. I interviewed there two women and their stories all came together in a book with their lovely photographs, and their artifacts and the book was published and it was launched 10 years ago. We just had our, and we're also celebrating 'She Settles in the Shields' this past year as well, the 10 year anniversary.

And we also got a sequel that we're doing now, which is looking at the second and third generation migrant women and their stories. So again, that's been quite a lovely project for me. One of the first women I interviewed was my grandma, like I said, we were from the area. So she was the one that I thought I'd try it on her, make sure that I, because it's all new for me, but it was such a pleasure recording my Gran's story. Because I thought I knew my Gran, but I think through the project, the kind of questions that I was asking her, I've never heard that side of her life history before. And it was just an eye opener. And I felt that then that everybody should be doing this. I was like really encouraging other community members as well, that they should document their stories, their family histories.

And I think for being a South Asian, from a South Asian family, a lot of them, migrants about 10 years ago, they were still living, those that were first arrived in Glasgow and Scotland, they were in their old age and we just felt that, well, if you don't get their stories, now we're going to lose it forever. They were the pioneers that came from India, Pakistan, but also China as well during that time. So we just felt that then it was really important to record those stories. There was other communities that have been settling in Scotland a lot earlier. So you had the Jewish community and the Italian and they were into their second part generation. So yeah, so it was all timely around then. There's a lot of funding and support to do these projects, so I'm glad I'm still working on it. So working on the sequel and I'll be out and about again, recording stories in these coming months.

Cherish Watton: That's wonderful. I think to be able to have that sense of generation, that you're going back to families 10 years after you first met them and then talking to other family members about it. I mean, that's such an incredible experience for you, but also the archive that you're leaving in terms of those oral histories. The fact you're really able to go into those in a lot more detail is fantastic. So that's a really nice segue then between the work that you're doing, talking to people about their lives and then the work that you're doing around the Life Books Project, which is how I found out about Glasgow women's library and the work that you are doing. So could you give listeners a bit of an introduction to the Life Books Project?

Syma Ahmed: Yeah, so that came about when I was working with the different groups and I realized that the women, when I asked them about the life and again, it just came from the heritage projects that I was doing. When I asked them about their life, they didn't really have much to say, or they felt there wasn't much to their lives and I felt, oh, right, okay, that's something that we need to explore a bit more because everybody's got something about them that there's a special quality or special qualities. And I just felt that the something that I wanted to explore further. And I thought with any project I do is usually this creative element attached to it. So it's a storytelling and, or we're learning something, we're doing something discussing something important to us as women, but then making something.

So the scrapbooking life books came about from that realisation. And what I had done was I had the different themes that I wanted the women to cover as part of the Life Books Project. And it was again going back and asking about their early memories, cherished memories, childhood play, friends, and went on to becoming a young woman and types of things they were doing in terms of education, or roles or that they had jobs that they might be doing at that time as a young woman, we had marriage in there because that was a hot topic for some of them. But again, with some of the themes, it was their choice if they wanted to use that as a theme. So marriage was one, children, work, education, lifelong learning.

So again, with the women, they felt that, well, they might not have been in a formal education, or they had done, or didn't get a chance to complete it. So they felt like, oh, they didn't have much to say there, but it was that for them to realise that, well, actually you're learning every day and coming to a group like the group that they were attending, that they're learning so much there, and this is all part of lifelong learning. So for them, it was then for them to identify, well, actually I've been coming to the group who took part in this Life Books Project, and I made this placard and I wrote some poetry for it and I campaigned for that. And so it was about them just realising, well, actually that was something they did. This is what they learned through it, and this is how they contributed. So all that then we captured in those themes. And I think the one about their own self, this part of the book was probably the most difficult.

They were quite good with childhood memories. And it was just nice to go back to reminisce around their life because they didn't have the opportunity to do that before in terms of telling their story. So that was all quite nice. And with the pages they were creating, they were able to create those lovely pages with the different colours, and the gems and all the rest. And again, with some of them, they felt well writing wasn't there, they struggled with writing in English. I said well, you can write in your community language. And if it was even in that they don't have to write lots. It could just be statements, just a little paragraph. It didn't require a lot of writing, which worked well with some of my groups. And like I said, fast forward to the pages when it became like, what is it in terms of empowerment, in terms of who they are, in terms of their skills and development, that's where they were like, oh no, we don't know what to put in here.

And that's where we teased it out. Basically at the end of it, they had a lot, they can put down even like supporting their children in their learning in school. Some of them were part of school council, taking part in activities there. And so all that we were able to document. And then at the end we had future aspirations and that's quite a nice thing for them to be thinking about, because maybe they didn't actually think too far into the future, but it was like, well, actually this is where you are now, where would you like to be in five years, time and 10 years time. And that's what a nice activity for them to be looking forward to and thinking, well, actually this is important to me. I'd love to get more into writing, I've always wanted to do this.

It's just for them to basically think about these things and have it of the forefront. So hopefully maybe they're able to then do something for it. If they're visualising it and thinking about it, most likely they'll be able to do it. So all that came together, then it was a gentle process where they were chatting, sharing. They were bringing in pictures over the weeks. So this ran on for six to eight sessions, more likely eight sessions, because it was just time it took. So I was working with them for each group for two months and the books, the techniques they were learning as well. So it was at first when we started, they loved just sticking down the gems. Gems were just everywhere. So I hid them. And I thought, well, look at your page and design your page first, you got about sticking everything down. It's about where do you want, where do you want what, and how do you want this a page to appear colours, and the words and all the rest. So that was fine. So I think it was a bit of learning for myself as well. And they made some really beautiful pages. And I think they felt really empowered through the process because it was the, like I said, the first time they were telling their story and sharing it with the rest of the group, what the bits they were comfortable with. And they were learning quite a lot from each other as well. They'd been meeting in the group previously, although they seem to have like they know each other, but I think through the project, they were able to learn a lot more about one another. So it was just a lovely, lovely thing.

In the end, we bound the book together, their scrapbook, we had a binding machine in the library. So it was just great to have consolidate everything, and it all came together at the end, in their book, in the front cover. And we had this big celebration at the end. And the women then be showed off their books, but they've chose to read something from their book. And when they took it home, they said that their families were pleasantly taken aback by what they had created. It was a real celebration of their life, so it's such a lovely, lovely project. So that's that in a nutshell, I know that it's a lot in it.

Cherish Watton:

That's yeah, such a rewarding process, I think, to be scrapbooking yourself and then for you to be able to coordinate that activity, there's so much to unpack there. I loved the way that you were talking about how this was an opportunity to celebrate women's lives form of empowerment. And it was the first time that women were able to tell their stories, I guess, on their own terms. So I wonder if you could pull out a little bit more why you felt that perhaps you went to women initially about their life story, why they weren't happy to share or didn't feel they had anything to share, and how that changed then when they came together in a group. What was the role of the scrapbook there in allowing women to tell their lives, when a few weeks before they didn't necessarily feel comfortable? because that feels like such a transformation in how you reflect on your own life, and your own stories that you tell as an individual woman.

Syma Ahmed:

I think at first when they started, they just felt that they didn't have much to their lives and didn't have much to contribute, they just really were quite on hard on themselves I felt, although we were just a housewife, just a mum. And it was very much like, well, let's look further, let's look at things that just your interests, that was in the initial thing that they came, but they didn't know how



others were going to take their story or understand them or get what they're about. So I think they were apprehensive at start. I think maybe some of them felt that, well, actually others might have more they've done in their lives, and I might not sound that have done much and I might not be perceived in the way that I want to be. So I think there's a lot of apprehensions there to start with. And I think when we started, like for example, the first page we created was just about something that was very easy-going, and it just listing them up by using their hands.

And that usually works well, but when they're actually making something and then the conversations followed. So the first page we made was their name. And we spoke about, so they wrote their name and they Googled if they didn't know the meaning of their name and it was such a nice exercise, it was about what does your name mean and who named you? And then a lot of these lovely meanings came up of what their name meant. And some of them had a lot of nice stories to share about who named them and why and all the rest. So that's how we started. And by that time they're like, all right, okay, we kind of get what we're doing in terms of creating these pages. And I think then we just started off again, the nice and easy questions about their earliest memories, friends and things like that, and then we got onto more teasing out.

And I think by that time they felt a bit more relaxed. They were able to, once we had those discussions before those pages about actually, you're coming to this group, what kind of things have you learned over this past year or these last few years, or if you knew what... And I think they were able to, once they were able to get that down in paper, I think, well actually there is done all these things and I'm doing this means something. And for us to acknowledge that for them like, oh, this is great in voicing that in the group. And then hitting it back, they're like, all right, okay. And the feel-good factor and just that confidence. And I think that just then helped them then when creating those pages to just get onto that section of the book.

And I think like you said, it was that transformation it felt midway when we were doing the project. And I think they were still like, all right, I wonder how this is all going to come together in the end. Because it was like, there were all these loose pages of scrapbook. And I think at that point they were getting lost in, oh, what was that again? And finishing up this page and it got ad hoc and a bit crazy at some sessions, but in the end it all came together and thought, oh, this is my book. But me, my life is like you said, it's in their own terms, is what they wanted to write about. And as a facilitator, I was just there to guide them and give them ideas, and that's what it's about. The bits that I felt I had to tease out with them and the gentle approaches that was something was that was needed in terms of encouraging some of the women.

And that's all it is, you just need that opportunity to give them an idea. When I was listening to a lot of these stories, and they had fantastic stories that they were sharing, which they attributed nothing much to themselves, they just felt, oh, well, I've done this, or I was helping, for example, one lady, she was a carer.

And when she'd care for her in-laws for so many years. So she spoke about how she did and what she had to learn in terms of contacting support for the in-laws and what kind of things she had to get in place. And I think when she talked through it all, I thought, well, actually this is something that is, first of all, it's a good thing to do it, but also a lot of the system in terms of NHS and social work and all the rest that she had to learn and understand.

So I think, I mean, she went through all that. She go actually yeah, if I was to get up and do this again, because I know what to do. I know what's advice to give others if they were going through this thing, it was about them self-identifying the different things of their life they were doing and they were good at it. And so I think that's what it was. It was just about teasing out those things and giving them opportunity and examples of, well, this is something, this is an achievement, this is something to be celebrated. This is you.

Cherish Watton: Okay. It sounds like as well, it's making visible a lot of the invisible things that women, as you say, caring on a regular basis, do it can be taken for granted, I think in lots of different circles. And as you say, some communities can be quite, not necessarily see that as a form of work but is actually absolutely critical to other people's lives. And actually being able to record that and get some value from that and share that with other people is really incredible.

Syma Ahmed: One of the exercises we did was that those that were like, well, we're just 'at home, doing home chores' I said, if you were to put a price on that, you obviously doing all of these things. Your husband goes to work, but if you were to put a cost to all the chores you do, this is like, and they actually did it. They're like, well, okay, if this is how much this was, if you were to get somebody else. And that was an interesting exercise for them to realise, you know what, you're contributing something really important to the family. And otherwise, if you were to get somebody to do that, this is how much it'll cost. And also we spoke about parenting. So it's important to be like, I know some people choose to work and that's all fine and all that it, but for those that didn't choose to work, that they were fulfilling a very important role as a parent. And it's not just about, well do my kids' homework and I'm taking them here and there, but just having like a parent present with them after school, all these things are important as well.

So I think for them to feel like, well actually, yeah, there's value to this work I'm doing, it should be acknowledged. They shouldn't just be written off. And I know with some communities, it was almost like there's, if you were educated or if you're got a job you're going to, it somehow seems like on the hierarchy of things that, oh yeah, this person's doing okay and others looked down on. So I think we were able to sort through some of the sessions, we were able to talk about these things as well. And I think they felt, they understood like, yeah, well actually they're doing quite a lot as women and they undersell themselves. That was interesting.

Cherish Watton: And I think as well, the project is very collaborative in nature. Because I think when people think about scrapbooking, perhaps more generally, they think of someone probably at home by themselves making a scrapbook and it's a very individual practice. And I think what's really interesting is lots of people are coming together at your library, making books about their own lives, but they're doing that in conversation with a group of other women. And I wondered if you could talk about how important that collaborative experience of making a scrapbook altogether was and do you think the project would have had the same impact if women had not been altogether in that space going on that scrapbooking journey?

Syma Ahmed: I think being together as a group there is a lot of conversations of learning. We're looking at each other for ideas spill. Somebody trying something out on their scrapbook, a particular design, they worked for different items and think, well, actually that looks good. I'd love to do this. And they were actually helping each other out, going to feel at some point they'll be like, all right, you're copying me or they know they were like, all right, that looks really good. I'd love to do this. And they were just to help each other and giving each other ideas. That was one thing. And it was just that excitement around it. After some of the women and some of the groups I'd worked with they hadn't done this type of art before. They might have done other craft stuff like sewing, knitting and things like that. Needle work was something that was quite common with some of the groups, but this type of thing was new. So I think this is excitement around it. And the fact that they were able to write in their own language, some words they probably chose to write in English just at here dotted about, but their main element of the story was in their own language. And I think they felt well, actually this is great. And over the weeks when they were bringing in their photographs, it was just the laughter and just the interest and like, all right, really interested in their family history and their stories. So a lot came out of that. And I think that was a lovely collaborative piece of work. It just really worked well, it being in a group.

Cherish Watton: Yeah. Can you try and describe to the listeners just pages actually look like, in terms of the material, how they're arranged, perhaps some of the colours, give us a peek into some of your scrapbooks.

Syma Ahmed: Some of the pages for example, if they took a colour, whatever colour it was they would then try and match the accessories to go with it. So for example, their page with their children. So this is my family. They'd have a picture of their family. It could be her and her husband or her and her sisters or her children. And then they'd crop the picture. So basically they would put a picture with a background, so brings it out, then they would stick it down. But some of it, they would choose to stick down straight on or they'd use the home pads so it's raised from the paper. So then, so some of it, they had to think about what bits they want to have raised others just stuck straight down. Then obviously the little notes of who these people were. So some of them for example, had, I had showed them example of the photograph and we had strips underneath those

photographs, so it's almost like the names of the people and the year they were born and they had just turn it around.

But obviously it just in the way, it was like a 3D effect with some of the pages. So then they chose to have the names, the date of birth, the year, and a little description of when that was that this picture was taken. Then they would think about the accessories they want to add on. And there'll be a title to the page as well. So they'll have the title like my family or whatever it may be. Then the gems would come after that because it gets till the end. So before they even got to that stage, it was about how to use a guillotine to cut out their bits of paper, what colour to use, what would go good colour of the pen as well, just everything. And they were very keen that everything matched and it flowed, it took a lot of time looking at, well that would go with this, and this will look good as a background. This would look nice.

And I think as they did the pages, they got better and better at it. So I always say to them that gems are nice, of course, but not to overload the page because then it kind of takes it away from the actual message. And I think then they got better at, initial pages were a lot of gems and then it went to a bit more in terms of their design and their ideas and more writing and the pages probably a bit more structured you could see. We would add ribbon on all sorts of things. We had holes in the paper, for example, with punch holes, we had the different, and then there'd be ribbon weaving in and out. But yeah, I think that's what some of the pages looked at. They looked really really nice.

Cherish Watton:

A huge attention to detail then in terms of what it feels like as an experience to engage with the book in a very physical manner, as well as just reading and glancing at the photographs. You briefly mentioned after this eight-week project, then you said that women took the books home and showed it to their family members. Do you get a sense talking to some of the women who came along to the earlier sessions, do they update them for example back home, do they bring it into other sessions, continue it in perhaps different forms, maybe digitally. Do you get a sense of the legacy of the project in women's lives?

Syma Ahmed:

The book is bound now, so it's difficult to pull it apart and then add more pages into it. But that's just as it is. But there has been other elements of as recording their stories. And over the past few years, it's been a lot more digital now. So for example, we've went in and women have shared the photographs again, or this year for example, this past year, we're doing a lot of intergenerational work. So we've got the women again now telling their stories, but with this theme of inter generation going through, so it's about their daughters, granddaughters, what legacy they want to leave, what aspirations do they have, the sense of sisterhood and womanhood and their families. So we're recording those stories now. And some of them might not come together as a book or anything. It might be a digital thing. So we're recording little clips, there's audio, and that's all coming together with photographs as a little film clip.

So just different ways we are trialling out, but again, women sharing different stories, aspects of their life. So I think that's all happening. The idea the seed was planted then I think for them. And I think when they had done the scrapbooking, I think they're more comfortable now in exploring different aspects of their life and maybe seeing where they're at now from where they first started, so that's been quite nice. Once we've finished the project, we've got, it makes its own archive as well, but we've got things that they take home, but we've got things that we then include in our archives. We're building that constantly, that's something that we are looking, I know libraries across the board and museums are doing that, especially with the Black Lives Matter movements that what does the collection tell you about the organization.

So even before all this, the Black Lives Matter of movement, we were glad we were already doing a good job in terms of equality and diversity and inclusion work. And in fact, we delivered training on that for other organisations. So I think we are constantly looking at our collection as well to see like what's needed, what more work do we need to do to ensure that different communities are represented and their stories are represented. So that's ongoing work, but it's really, really good fruitful work that's taking place.

Cherish Watton:

Absolutely. And I think it, I don't know, just from my experience talking to different people, particularly around scrapbooks, they perhaps wouldn't think to give them to an archive because they're not seen to be that valuable and what would an archive do with them. And I think actually the role you are doing, creating that material, like people who donating material kind of like your co-producers and you're working so collaboratively, quite a broad question to end on. But what advice would you give listeners who are keen to start their own Life books, whether it is at home or whether it is forming their own community group, what advice would you give them?

Syma Ahmed:

If you're working with a group, I would say, it was good to have your sessions organized in terms of what you want to be achieving throughout. I mean, like I said, I had six to eight sessions that I put for this and usually the workshops I have are four sessions, up to four sessions, but this one took longer because I think it was just the nature of the project and the time it takes for the pages to be put together. So I think give yourself that time when you're planning, and also think of the themes that you want, both for your group participants to be working on, or I think have examples there already. So if anyone gets stuck, they've got something to go on and they all are working in their different stages. So when you'll have some women coming in, they're making one page after the other and they're onto the next.

So have it, organise yourself that you've got like everything planned out beforehand, so even if somebody's moving on to the next stage, they're able to do that and nobody's holding each other back. And what I've watched is when, with all the themes I had, basically, I just made up a clip up with life books and almost like their just blank pages with just the questions at the top. So they've got that little group clip they're to scribble on and designing their pages and just

doodle on and whatnot. And that's quite nice to have ready for them and given to them in the beginning. And they can also take it home because often during the sessions, they're too busy making the scrapbook and the conversations and all the rest. But when they're at home, they've got time to reflect and in their own.

So if they've got that booklet with them and those questions, they could be writing at home in their own time and bringing it into the session the week after. Understand that everybody will be in different stages as like the abilities. So there might be some that be able to create 15 pages at the end and others might just be able to do four or five, and that's fine just to have it like that. There's no right and wrong with a scrapbook, just understand the abilities, different abilities within the group, and then just gently write them according to their needs. I often had volunteers that worked with me. So those that were needed, that one to one support, they were able to sit down and explore some of the themes and work with the women. So it just depends on you. Like I had with some of the elderly groups they were, who struggled with physically with maybe sticking things down or in terms of their disability maybe with their hands, and so they had basically somebody working with them on that.

With the materials for example, not have everything at all at the one time to start with, I think maybe gently give them some techniques throughout the weeks that come. Because sometimes it's an overload of information and they don't know what to do then, that you want to do everything on week one. So maybe I start them off with a few techniques and ideas to begin with to start them off, start off easy. And then as a week go have known that you'll be doing these two new things these particular weeks, and then you've got that time then to make those pages using those techniques. And I think, yeah, I think that's...

Cherish Watton:

Yeah. No, that's fantastic advice there really, really practical. And I love that as you said, the scrapbook allows people to do exactly what they want with it. So it's to embrace that flexibility and creativity and not being afraid of being judged with how much you create and how you create it. It's about handing the power over to the scrapbooker to do what they want with their scrapbook.

Syma Ahmed:

Another thing I'd add is when those pages, where I really wanted them to think about their value, who they are as women and their role, and what they feel they have contributed in those sessions. It can be done with just having a time where they're able to reflect and really talk about things out with the scrapbooking day. I just feel that then there's some important themes that we want women to cover, but they're too busy. They they're not attentive. They don't give it much time and they're too busy trying to stick down things.

And so I maybe give that some of the themes that they want to explore further, just a time where they've got like, they maybe have some objects or photographs for them to be looking at, then having a conversation before they get go, then actually making their page. Because I just feel like they struggle

with some of the pages, because they've not really thought it through, they've not had that time. And when they come to that session where it's like, right, okay. In terms of their lifelong learning, they just need that time to explore it a bit more. If you feel that there's some things that need to be explored a bit more, just give it more time, another session.

Cherish Watton: That's fantastic advice. Well, thank you so much for joining me today on The Scrapbook History Podcast. I'm sure our listeners have come away with so much useful information on your project and how they can apply some of that back in their own communities. So thank you so much.

Syma Ahmed: Oh, it's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Cherish Watton: What do you think of the Scrapbook History Podcast? Tell me. Go to [scrapbooks.org.uk/feedback](https://scrapbooks.org.uk/feedback) and fill in a very short survey. It should take no more than one minute and will help to make the podcast even better.

The Scrapbook History Podcast is produced by me, Cherish Watton, supported by Content Editor Bridget Moynihan and Production Assistant Navjyot Lehl. This podcast is made possible with funding from the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities and the Wolfson Foundation.