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Borrow a Muslim? A 'living library' to prick stereotypes

In 12 countries, people check out people for a 30-minute conversation to challenge their own prejudices.

By [Mark Rice-Oxley](#) | Correspondent of *The Christian Science Monitor* from the June 4, 2008 edition

London - It works like a conventional library. Tables and chairs are set out for study. Librarians bustle purposefully, staffing the checkout desk.

Except these aren't books on loan. They're people.

Welcome to the Living Library. Here, you borrow individuals who represent stereotypes that often are the target of prejudice or hatred.

At this east London library on a recent Saturday, there were 26 "books" available, including a Muslim, an immigrant, a transgender individual, a witch, and an Indian atheist.

Readers borrow them for half an hour, hear their narrative, question them, even pry a little, and – so the theory goes – break down some of their preconceptions and stop "judging the book by the cover."

The idea is the brainchild of Ronni Abergel, a Danish anti-violence campaigner, who has taken the Living Library to 12 countries and watched it flourish in places as diverse as Australia and Turkey.

"We live in a time where we need dialogue," says Mr.

Abergel. "With dialogue comes understanding and with that comes tolerance and that's the mission of the Living Library: to promote understanding and tolerance through dialogue."

There is certainly plenty of dialogue at this London venue.

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At one table, a Rwandan refugee explains to a listener why immigrants cannot be dismissed both as a drain on the public purse and a threat to local jobs. At another, a transgender individual relates why she felt biologically compelled to change sex. An Indian atheist and a Muslim are setting forth their worldview to "readers."

And those 'books' that aren't currently checked out – among them a witch, a funeral director, a medium and a police officer – are swapping stories in the back room, eating sandwiches, and waiting for their next appointment.

All of the "books" are unpaid volunteers, as are the organizers, recruited for the event.

Upon entry, readers can browse a list of available "books," then sign up for their "book" with volunteer librarians. On this Saturday, more than 50 people signed up, and some books were booked out almost the entire day.

"I've done this in 12 countries now," says Abergel, who has received funding from two organizations, the Council of Europe and the Nordic Council of Ministers. "In some places, I'll seed [the idea] and in some I'll put in the seeds and come back and pick the fruits. Here, I'm training someone to do it, helping with their first events."

The types of 'book' engaged vary from country to country. And the response from the public can be instructive. In Britain, for example, the Muslim and the ex-gang member are popular. In Hungary, it was the neo-Nazi, says Abergel. In some countries, homosexual 'books' are popular, but less so in a place like Britain, "because here you're more liberal and used to it."

"In Hungary, the first year, the homosexual didn't go out at all, because people didn't dare – and they didn't take the policeman either."

The concept is proving popular in Australia, Abergel says, with a regular Living Library session once a month in Lismore, New South Wales. "Turkey's just got up and running, and Germany and Austria are doing very well," adds Abergel, who says he has spent 50 percent of his spare time over the past eight years working on his project.

Now he has his eyes on America.

"The next big move in the fall here is to start a tour in the States," he says. "We are looking to go to interested colleges in the States." One date in Fort Wayne, Ind., is inked in and others are interested, says Abergel.

"We also want to take it into businesses. Why not go to large corporations and have their workers come down and have half an hour to have their horizons expanded a little bit?"

Abergel traces the origins of the concept back to a Friday night in Copenhagen, 15 years ago. A friend, just 19, was stabbed six times for no apparent reason. Still a teenager himself, Abergel and three friends responded by setting up Stop the Violence, a group aimed at doing just that.

Seven years later, the group was invited to put on a "happening" at the annual Roskilde rock music festival. The idea of Living Library was born in a brainstorming session in January 2000. But it took several years to get it properly off the ground. Initially, the library had outings at festivals in Denmark, Hungary, and Norway. But three years ago, it started to "franchise" the concept, and now dozens of Living Libraries are held in Europe every year.

"We see it as an important tool to promote democracy and human rights," says Silje Bergum Kinsten of the Nordic Council of Ministers, which sponsors the concept.

For the "books," the event can be a rare opportunity to express their side of the story. Kerry Whybrow, a transgender person, says her readers were interested in why she made the change. She says it was a chance to do a little PR for the 15,000 transsexuals in Britain.

"I'm making my journey and I want people to understand that," she says. "If only 10 of your readers pick up on that and change their attitudes, that's 10 fewer people that are going to be bigoted in their attitude towards some poor old transgender person."

Stephen Fisher, a school inspector, says he learned as much from other "books" as he did from telling readers about the complexities of assessing schools. "Many of our prejudices are just things you don't know and once you explain to people they understand," he says. "I've learned so much about witches that I didn't know."

Abergel admits that the people who could most use a little dialogue, tolerance, and understanding are unlikely to use his library. "People who are extremely prejudiced will never come to a Living Library," he says. "The criticism that we have is we are preaching to the congregation – we're getting people who are open minded.


"But people who are open-minded still need confirmation that they are on the right track," he says.

Another criticism is that not all readers will overcome their prejudice during a 30-minute conversation. Reader David Semple says he found sessions with a funeral director and a police officer most illuminating. But the transgender "book" enlightened him less.

"The conversation was lovely but I'm afraid I still have the prejudice," he says. "I still find it hard to comprehend why you change your gender."

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