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## I'd like to renew Lesbian Feminist

*Living Libraries lend out people instead of books. The aim is to overcome prejudices.*

PATRICIA TREBLE | July 23, 2008 |

At a Living Library held at the end of May in London, the 26 "books" available for loan included Funeral Director, Witch, Indian Atheist, and Post-Op Transgender Person, not to mention Irish Traveller. What the blandly uninformative titles don't convey is that the books were actual humans. Living Libraries allow "readers" to have a candid chat with people (referred to as books) they'd normally never meet. The process, from searching the catalogue to taking out the book, mimics a real library. But the intent is to overcome stereotypes and prejudices. The organizer in London, Anne Kilroy, advised readers to "choose a book to reflect their prejudice." By that she means "challenge," and to that end the books wore T-shirts with the slogan "What's Your Prejudice?" and the catalogue description attached to each listed common stereotypes — those attached to Police Officer, for example, included "racist," "homophobic" and "bully."

Since readers know they can speak privately in a non-threatening, neutral environment, no question is off limits. At an April event in London, an Anglican trainee priest curious about same-sex families borrowed Gay Man. Among the 104 Lending Library patrons in May were two young men who became so engrossed in a conversation with Police Officer they renewed him three times. The most popular title, Ex-Homeless Person, was exhausted at the end of a day of 30-minute Q & A sessions.

The Living Library's origins trace back to Copenhagen where Ronni Abergel, then a 19-year-old student, and some friends set up an NGO called Stop the Violence after a friend was brutally stabbed in 1993. Forty-thousand teens joined the NGO, which used peer group education to stop kids from carrying knives. From there the group came up with the Living Library. According to Abergel, the premise couldn't be simpler: "If people talk to each other, they'll understand each other better. And with understanding comes better tolerance." Abergel's group tried out the concept at a Danish festival in 2000 with 75 books. "We felt the worst that could happen is the books would talk to each other," Abergel said. It was a roaring success and so far there have been 100 events in 23 countries.

For Douglas College, in New Westminster, B.C., establishing a Living Library was a way to "move talent into the community," explains organizer Hazel Postma. Instead of dealing with prejudices, the college's catalogue strives to be informational, with titles like Stained Glass and Insect Biology. Heidi Currie, a criminology instructor, signed on as her specialty, Mental Health Law and Policy, and was loaned out last year to a woman with psychiatric issues in her family. Now Postma is in discussions with the Coquitlam Public Library to make the two-year-old Living Library, now only available through the college website, even more

accessible.

Librarians around the world have seized on the idea. In Australia, the Lismore City Library runs a monthly version. For July, 13 books, including *Muslim*, *Adopted*, and *Lesbian Feminist*, from a catalogue of nearly 60 titles, were available. The books, easily identified by their black pinafors printed with "Book" in vivid yellow, talk with their readers in a meeting room set up with chairs and privacy partitions. Reader Victoria Maddock borrowed *Person Living With AIDS*. While Maddock admitted "it was challenging to sit down to speak to someone who had different experiences," she found her book willing to answer all of her questions about the disease. Connections can come from the unlikeliest of encounters. While talking with a fellow book, Sudanese Refugee, *Pacifist* book John Jessup, who is visually impaired, realized she lived just a few houses away.

The concept, extended to schools and nursing homes, has been such a hit in Lismore, a small industrial city 150 km south of Brisbane, that librarian Lucy Kinsley has been given a grant to set up a national strategy. One key to the success in Australia is the orientation session for the books. There, says Kinsley, participants are strongly warned that there is to be no preaching or converting: the books are only to tell their stories and answer questions. Abergel knows his brainchild is not likely to convert those with extreme prejudices, whether against police officers or refugees, but even if it's only the fair-minded talking to the fair-minded, "dialogue creates understanding, tolerance and harmony." And he has no plans to stop promoting Living Libraries: "Once it's global I can sit down and relax."

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