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WORD PLAY

A 'living library' that opens minds

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- National
- World
- Business
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- Entertainment
- The Guide
- Arts & Culture
- The Envelope

Living

- Travel
- Health
- Autos
- Home & Garden
- Food
- Image
- Books
- Living Green

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- Video
- Photography
- Obituaries
- Crosswords/Sudoku
- Your Scene

Blogs

- Columnists
- Print Edition
- Readers Rep
- Corrections
- All Sections

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- Cars
- Real Estate
- Foreclosure Sale **NEW**
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- Personals
- Deals at Local Stores
- Coupons
- Newspaper Ads

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- In the Newspaper
- Online

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- Sign In
- Register
- Personalized News
- E-Mail Newsletters
- RSS Feeds



Living Library co-founder Ronni Abergel (in white t-shirt) with participants. Photo: FabianLewkowicz.com

An unusual interactive event brings people together at the Santa Monica Public Library.

By Sonja Bolle
November 16, 2008

On Oct. 18, the Santa Monica Public Library hosted an unusual interactive event called "The Living Library," in which people were the books and could be checked out for half an hour's conversation. Borrowers were instructed that "the Reader must return the Book in the same mental and physical condition as borrowed. It is forbidden to cause damage to the book, tear out or bend pages, get food or drink spilled over the book or hurt her or his dignity in any other way."

When I suggested to my 10-year-old son, Luke, and his pal, Grace, that it might be cool to go check out a book-person, they were dubious. They're good readers and completely comfortable at the big library, but that's because they know what will happen there and what is expected of them. They had a lot of questions about living books. Could they take out a book together? What exactly were they supposed to do with them? Would the books tell them stories?



Photo: FabianLewkowicz.com;

» Word Play: An archive of past reviews

None of us knew the answers, so we presented ourselves together in the peaceful courtyard of the downtown Santa Monica Main Library on Saturday afternoon: Luke, Grace, Grace's mother, Liz Dubelman, and I.

The first hurdle was the choice of book; the kids

had quickly decided to take out a book together. The list offered at the Living Library desk included a Buddhist, a nudist, a raw foodist and many other specialties that didn't necessarily rhyme, such as a fat activist, a feminist, a Oaxacan American and a celebrity publicist. The children briefly considered taking out a formerly homeless person, because they always have questions for their parents about how people actually manage on the streets. However, they rejected that notion as too embarrassing.

They settled on a teenager, then two teenagers, since the desk told them two teenagers were available. One went to public school, one to private school. That's all we

knew about them. They would be available for check-out in 45 minutes.

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