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## I would like to borrow a Muslim

Posted By [Alex Forsyth](#) On June 23, 2008 @ 8:31 pm In [Features](#), [In Depth](#) | [8 Comments](#)



**A new kind of Library has opened, where instead of books you can borrow a Muslim - or a single father, or a transvestite, for a chat. Alex Forsyth volunteers to be lent as a 'book', and asks whether this concept can really help break down stereotypes.**

A Muslim, a Catholic and a transsexual are sitting in a library. An opener to a joke this is not: It is the Living Library – where, instead of books, you borrow people. You pick a person for a 30-minute dialogue in which you can ask questions, engage in meaningful discourse or simply bounce ideas. I wait with the other 'books' to be borrowed.

At the front desk there is a catalogue listing the selection of human books on offer, and under each book title there are a handful of negative epithets. The stereotypes range from 'funeral director' (adjectives include 'morbid

and 'exploitative') to 'Indian atheist' ('eccentric', 'nonconformist'). As a prerequisite to interviewing the candidates, I had agreed to volunteer to join the Living Library as one of the books; the 'student'. In the catalogue at the Human Library's front desk, 'Student' was bundled with a healthy handful of clichés: Aside from 'tax-dodger', 'do useless degrees' and 'politically apathetic' I was also down for 'lazy', 'can't cook' and 'spends all money on beer.'

Sitting and chatting with the other books proved a little awkward at first, and there was a whiff of dark comedy in the air. Being asked 'What book are you?' and being expected to ask it back prompted surge of panic: If I didn't ask it would seem like I presumed to already know their title, thus presenting myself as someone prone to racial profiling or shallow judgements, while asking those with obvious outward signs of their title just seemed patronising.

What if I made the faux pas of guessing someone was 'Immigrant' when they were there as 'vegan'? Diffusing the tension, Nihad, 'Muslim' (Preconceptions: 'bearded', 'oppresses women'), pointed to me and grinned, "You must be the student... Big night yesterday?" The first time volunteers chatted to the veteran books, trying to dispel their anxiety - "what happens if you don't get borrowed? What happens if someone borrows you and hates you?"

As the public started borrowing books it seemed that not many people felt the need to challenge the scurrilous prejudices against students, so I took the opportunity to talk to the founder of the Living Library, Ronnie Abergel, and ask him what motivated him towards the project. "I worked at a youth organisation," he explains in an accent that

jumps between American and Danish. "We had kids killing each other with knives for nothing. We had to find a way of making them see the human being behind the caricature. To not see the young immigrant boy, to not see the police uniform but to see the human." The Living Library has the ethos, 'To build a relation to the human being and not to the stigma.' Its aim is to allow members of the public to engage in candid discussions with people that they may not normally have a chance to meet, and to break down preconceptions that they may hold about that social group or people.

The list of books has grown from minority groups frequently confronted with discrimination and social exclusion to a wide-ranging cross-section of society. I ask Abergel if the Library ever has to turn down volunteer books and he nods, rubbing his stubble. "I've turned some away, not necessarily because they're inflammatory, they're just not relevant for what we are trying to do."

I ask him for an example. "We had a person who was pro-slavery," he tells me, shaking his head. "It's not relevant, you are not exposed to prejudice, who in their right mind is going to feel sympathy for you?" I suggest to Abergel that it might be beneficial to have access to more controversial books. He insists that in order to create cohesion within the book choices the Library has to be selective. "You set forth aims and objectives to each event and if, like today, it's to bring attention to mainstream stereotypes then there are certain [books] that are too soft or too weak."

But how far does the project fulfil its objective? While those already through the doors may genuinely be on the way to breaking down their preconceptions, the Living Library is, by default, its own filter: The type of person willing to attend is someone who is prepared to admit they hold prejudices and are willing to challenge them. Those with seriously bigoted views would not even make it to the door. I take this concern to Anne Kilroy, the Facilitator. "Yes that is a shortcoming" she admits. "You are not going to reach the people with very extreme views, no matter what you do. The vast majority of people like ourselves all have negative stereotypes or prejudices and it's difficult for us to admit that - these are the people we reach." The real targets of the Library are those who have been lulled into a false sense of tolerance, espousing liberal values and acceptance, while unwittingly harbouring bias against certain social groups. We are constantly bombarded with reminders of how cosmopolitan Britain is, especially in London, but Abergel thinks this is illusory. "A citizen survey of last year showed that most white Caucasian British have very little meaningful interaction with minorities," he tells me. "And the people that think they do have it? They go into a shop where the owner is from a minority, they say hello and how much and they pay." He smirks, "They call that meaningful interaction."

Back in the waiting room I raise the issue with Victoria, 'girl with facial disfigurement', ('lonely'). She has a rare genetic disorder known as Cherubism, causing a prominence in the lower part of the face. She sees the social exclusion she experiences as being a result of what she terms as a sort of "mutual misconception" of her disorder. For her, the Living Library is a way to break this stalemate, allowing people to talk to her candidly about her disfigurement. "A lot of people imagine themselves as normal, open-minded, they don't judge anybody. Then they are faced with someone in a wheelchair or someone with a disfigurement and they don't know how to react, they don't know where to look."

I was curious to know what people ask her. "Helpful questions mainly, about interaction. I've had one who just asked me 'Where should I look if someone has a facial disfigurement?' I told him the best place is always the eyes, or just above the eyes." I ask her if she thinks she holds any prejudice of her own. "In a way. I used to hate people staring at me, I thought they did it because I looked different." But after confronting people, she tells me, it turned out that many of them simply recognised her work on television, "So I was making judgements too," she admitted.

As the morning turns to afternoon the books start to fly off the shelves. A young lady is poring over the catalogue. She squeals like a child with unlimited book vouchers at the best sellers shelf, "I've always wanted to talk to a hypnotist. Though the transgender might be interesting. Ooh! they have a witch!" Overwhelmed with choice she flicks back

and forth wondering who to borrow in her lunch break. This indecision was not uncommon as there were a choice of titles that spark great amount of interest with the readers. The books that are most borrowed are appropriately called 'best sellers', and looking at the sign out sheet there are some who have been booked out all day. So far transgender ('pervert') and witch ('satanist') have been the books of choice.

Another popular book was vegan ('hippy'). "I don't know why. I'm quite boring really," she says returning from another session. "But a lot of people don't get it. They just keep asking me what I eat." As 'lesbian' and 'girl with facial disfigurement' are checked out again, I start to feel like a schoolboy being picked last for sports. I am left making awkward conversation with the 'stay at home dad' and 'humanist'. We, clearly, are books that are being judged by our covers.

The Living Library is, without doubt, striking a chord with its visitors, but could it be easily misconstrued as making light of serious issues? Kerry, a 63 year old pre-op transsexual disagrees. She thinks that rather than make light of the issues, the Library helps reverse "media created issues. I spend a lot of time talking to the media but I can talk straight to people here. Every time they make a joke about a 'cock in a frock' in comedy or adverts tell you what men and women 'normally' do, it creates expectations. I'm big and broad, I'm 6 foot 3, I wasn't expected to be a wimp." The 'pro-life activist' comes to the same conclusion. "The news like to show a small group angry [pro-life] people waving boards... attacking doctors... but most of us disassociate ourselves with these people... unfortunately that's the image created" The media is cited as one of the main contributors to the stereotypes by the majority of people I speak to. Abergel agrees. "If you don't have access to a social group, where else are you going to find it? Media ethics discussions should be set up, but that's a whole different thing. The point is, here you can get a second opinion for yourself. You get a second opinion at the doctors, right? If someone tells you all Muslims are killers, what do you do? You find out for yourself, you seek out alternative opinion."

So where next for the Living Library? "The next dimension," Abergel says excitedly, "are the post-conflict territories. We took it to Palestine [but] they're not ready for it yet. There are suggestions of taking it around university campuses and festivals. It's the perfect audience: that's where it started. In a festival." We are nearly at closing time and I am about to give up hope when I am tapped on the shoulder by an avuncular middle-aged man who asks if I am the 'student.'

We sit with a coffee and I ready my wits for a solid 30 minutes of railing accusations. Instead we end up comparing our experiences as students, studying in the late sixties versus studying in the late noughties. He tells me of riots and values, punting and lectures on acid. I consider telling him that actually most of us spend our days sleeping in and doing little work. That we spend our money on cheesy chips and spend our nights in sub-par clubs. That days drift by on cheap alcohol and fumbled flirtations. That we kept the casual sex but lost the ideologies.

But I decided not to in the end. It sounded like a bit of a stereotype.

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