

Living Library

Talking books that actually talk back

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GUELPH, ONT. — "The 12 o'clock timeslot?" Bogdan Miclaus, a staff member at the University of Guelph's McLaughlin Library, searches his book list. "I've got Black Woman, Canadian Soldier, Lesbian Feminist and Mental Illness." The student at the front of a long line of readers was hoping for Phone Sex Worker.

"Booked out all day."

Unusual titles? Indeed. But the "books" themselves are far from typical. They talk, for starters.

For two days last week, the University of Guelph hosted a "living library" — a collection in which human beings are the books. Thirty-two individuals, many representing marginalized groups, were checked out for 30-minute discussions by curious "readers." Organizers say it was the first event of its kind held on a university campus in Canada, the third in Canadian history.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Dinuka Gunaratne is lent out as the Sri Lankan Conflict Survivor book. (*Peter Power/The Globe and Mail*)



The concept began in Denmark in 2000. "The whole idea is to sit down with real people and use them to move past a stereotype you might have," co-creator Ronni Abergel said. He wanted to mobilize Danish young people against violence after a friend was stabbed at a nightclub. "The living library works on the principle that extreme violence and aggression happens between people who don't know each other."

It is a theory Mr. Abergel is spreading through the Living Library non-profit organization, which has helped hold events in 27 countries to date, with Brazil, China, Colombia, Cyprus, Malaysia and South Africa expected to participate by the end of 2009. For the Canadian events, he personally consulted with the organizers. Two more are scheduled for Alberta later this month, and Toronto Public Library hopes to launch a pilot project at one of its branches this summer.

In Guelph, the book catalogue touched on many taboo topics, with titles such as Don't Call Me a Homo, HIV Positive and Transsexual Guy.

Perhaps the most brave to be found at the liberal campus: Pro-Life.

For Julia Chapman, editor of the student newspaper and contact for the Guelph event, the Living Library was a natural fit. "There is so much diversity on campus, we felt it important to provide a forum for constructive conversations on contentious issues."

The volunteer "librarians" in charge of checking out books encouraged readers to talk openly about their biases while abiding by essential handle-with-care guidelines: "The reader must return the book in the same mental and physical condition as borrowed. It is forbidden to cause damage to the book, or hurt her or his dignity in any way. The reader is responsible for preserving the condition of the book."

Reader Lisbeth Sider borrowed Sri Lankan Conflict Survivor. "I have very strong views about armed conflict, but I grew up in a culture that hasn't had to deal with war," said the self-defined pacifist who comes from a long line of Ontario Mennonites. "I wanted to talk to someone who has."

And, save for the past two years of life in Guelph, war is all 20-year-old international student Dinuka Gunaratne — the Sri Lankan book — has known. In a busy corner of the normally quiet library, the Sinhalese zoology major recounted a terrifying story of a family trip gone wrong at a cabin in Yala National Park.

"There was a knock. It was a group of Tamil soldiers. They had guns. We were so scared. Our tracker and cook ran away. They lined us up outside in our nightdresses. They were all in their teens. I couldn't believe they were so young," said Mr. Gunaratne, who was just 10 himself at the time.

"One soldier spoke with my mother. He understood her fear and tried to comfort her. He told us he wouldn't hurt us. This, from the Tamils we hear about blowing up buses! He approached us almost like brothers. They didn't want to be there, I know it. Then they burned down the cabin."

That day, Mr. Gunaratne said, he learned of the insanity that is war. He vowed to return to Sri Lanka one day to help foster understanding on both sides.

"If my mother found out I was taking part in Living Library, even talking about the war, she'd be terrified for my safety. But talking is where the understanding comes," he said. "This has been an incredible experience."

Biochemistry student Alexander Moore signed out the record number of books: nine. "If you meet someone in a minority, sometimes there's that social tension, like, how do I act? Here, it's safe to talk it out."

He said later, "I'm a middle-class Caucasian straight male. ... I don't have the experience of other people's stigmas. What an opportunity! Like with Gay Man. He has experiences I'll never have. He said to ask away — no holds barred. ... I couldn't believe the honesty, so I shared myself back with him."

Some readers came for one specific book. A slight young man in a long black overcoat made his request in a barely audible voice. "I'm here for Recovering Anorexic." Asked why he chose this book, he hesitantly replied: "I'm a — I have an eating disorder. You can advertise 'awareness weeks' all you want, but, well, I haven't met very many people who have made it out." After their 30 minutes were up, book and reader exchanged e-mails and hugged.

Jan Sherman, titled First Nations/Métis, also promised to stay in touch with a reader: Michael Mantel, who has written a few papers on land claims and is thinking of specializing in native law. For Mr. Mantel, the encounter was a chance to make up for adolescent folly.

"In high school in Penetanguishene [Ont.], we didn't hang out with the native kids," he said "My connection was [historic site] Sainte-Marie among the Hurons. My book taught me how to make an offering with tobacco. It was so cool."

Lesbian Feminist book, Veronica Majewski, confronted stereotypes straight on: "I do have short hair, I did play softball and I do own plaid. At the same time, I don't like Melissa Etheridge, I don't have a tattoo and I can't fix your car." And she was just as curious about her readers as they were about her. "One reader was very interesting because he had the most assumptions, like all feminists are lesbians," she said. "And, in fact, I am."

Her one regret was not booking out Pro-Life herself, for lack of time. "We met in the 'shelving room' [where books wait to be signed out]. I'll never agree with her, and she'll likely never agree with me ... but we could come closer to each other, find a way to co-exist peacefully."

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CHECK OUT THE LIBRARY

- **Douglas College** in New Westminster, B.C., is home to a permanent version of Living Library (douglas.bc.ca/community/foundation/living-library).
- Two Living Library events in Alberta are confirmed for this year. Five public library locations in **Calgary** will hold Living Library events on March 21. An interesting addition to the book catalogue: the "dictionary," who translates other languages including ASL. **University of Alberta's Augustana** campus will play host to a five-day Living Library from March 23 to 27 with the theme of "growing with people, growing in community, growing our world." LI>
- Check out living-library.org, the Living Library organization's website, for a downloadable kit on holding an event in your community.

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